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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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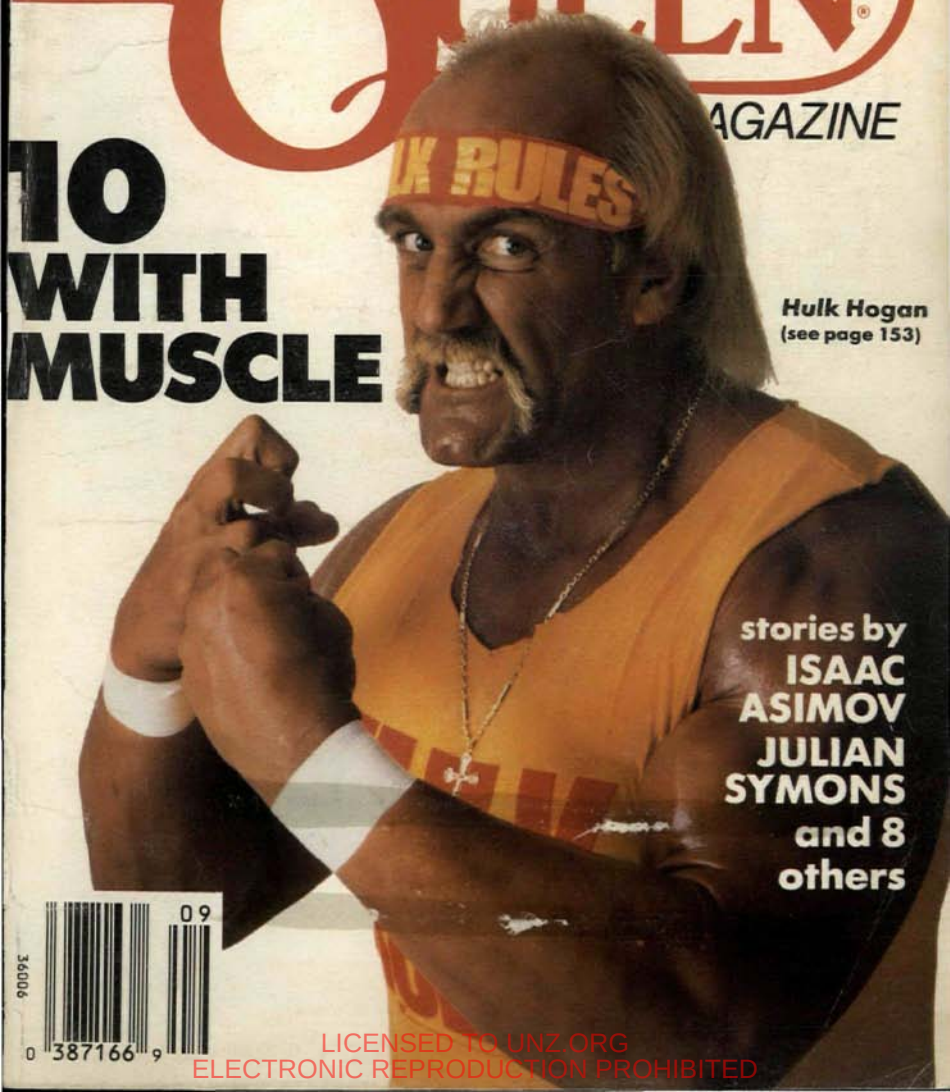

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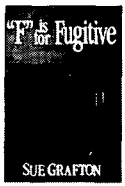

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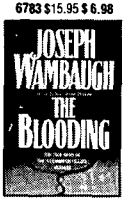

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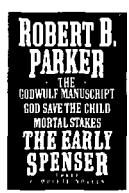

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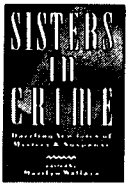

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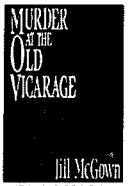

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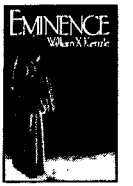

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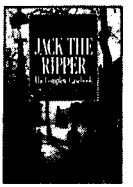

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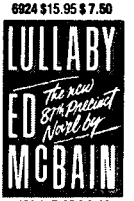

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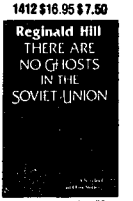

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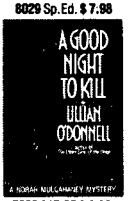

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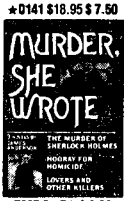

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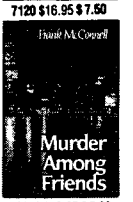

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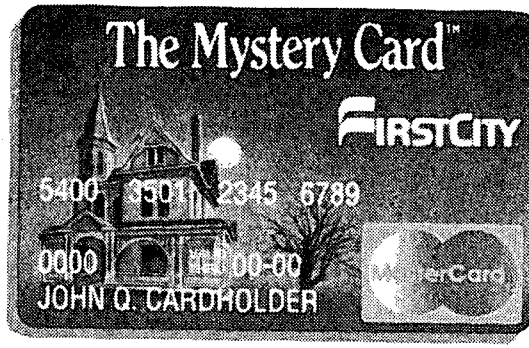

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On our cover is HULK HOGAN

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JAMES POWELL

The spread of the door-hats through White Swan was like watching a flame race along a fuse. At the match end was the tall, long-chinned Hester, who was among the timidest, most fragile creatures under the sun. In the west end of town, like the keg of dynamite at the other end of the fuse, lived Polly's sister-in-law—short, stocky, quick-tempered Mrs. Winifred Rettew . . .

THE DOORS OF SPRING

by JAMES POWELL

"Dear children," announced Mrs. McGargle, beaming at her small charges, "I've called this meeting to unravel the mystery of the diminishing fruit bowl." Three pairs of eyes widened and moved from the broad shiny face of their temporary nanny to the mysterious object covered with the red-and-white-checked napkin in the middle of the table. "Firstly," said Mrs. McGargle, taking a sip from her large white teacup and dabbing her downy lip with a knuckle wrapped in a second red-and-white napkin, "let us review our clues. Priscilla, would you begin, dear?"

"Green grapes and kiwis, Miss," declared the little girl with blonde pigtails, who refused to call Mrs. McGargle "ma'm" because she wore no wedding ring.

"And a pear that wasn't even a ripe one," added her younger brother, the tow-headed Rodney. "All green fruit."

"Last night's wasn't," insisted Eugene, his older brother and Priscilla's fraternal twin. "Last night was a banana and that's yellow."

"Good for you, young Eugene," nodded Mrs. McGargle. "And now

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to the curious business of the kitchen light that came on after Nanny'd tucked everybody in."

"It wasn't the kitchen light," insisted Eugene. "Just a light in the kitchen."

"A flashlight?" suggested Mrs. McGargle.

"No," said Priscilla. "It didn't move. It just got bigger or smaller. It was eerie."

"And I didn't even want to be there," said little Rodney. "But they said when stupid old Mrs. McGargle starts her snoring we'll creep out to the top of the stairs, that way we'll see the thief."

"Bless you, dears. Bless you," chuckled Mrs. McGargle, who could laugh without turning up the corners of her mouth.

"Then we heard the rude noises," said Priscilla.

"The slurpity-slurpity-slurp," said Rodney.

"That was the thief eating the banana," insisted Eugene. "When he was done, the light got brighter for a second, then it went out."

"Mother says it isn't polite to slurp when you eat," said Priscilla. "Or drink," she added, giving Mrs. McGargle a hard stare.

Mrs. McGargle maintained her smile. "The slurpity-slurp—there's where you little monkey-faces went off the track," she said. "It wasn't our thief's eating. It was his coming and going." As the children's eyes grew wide, she continued, "Yes, our culprit only made one mistake. The kiwi fruit, the green grapes, and the unripe pear would have gone undetected. But eating the banana, why that was as plain as day."

Here Mrs. McGargle reached over and whipped off the napkin, revealing a large glass bowl of lime jello. The children gasped, for there in the depths of the green dessert, which now quivered like a thing at bay, were bite-sized pieces of banana.

"Remember, dears, at supper the first day I arrived from the Granny Nanny Agency how we had that lively discussion about broccoli—"

"Yuk!" came the cries all around.

"—which meant you couldn't have the wholesome lime jello I made for your dessert. Then the following night your dear grandmother, fearing Mrs. McGargle might not be feeding her little lambs properly while their parents toured the Continent, brought by that wonderful chocolate cake which you and my gentleman caller Mr. Tolliver enjoyed so much. And then the next night as a return treat Mr. Tolliver took us out to Toad Hall—all you can eat for $2.95—and

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how afterward we let you watch us play bingo at St. Malachi's parish hall right across the street.

"So the jello sat neglected in the refrigerator. Now, when some things aren't used for the end they've been created for they go mad and run wild like rogue elephants." Mrs. McGargle smiled. "Those who don't know what 'rogue' means now owe Mr. Webster a little visit, don't they, dears?" Then she continued.

"Well, so it was with the lime jello here. Yes, the refrigerator light was the light you saw. After we were supposed to be in bed, the jello, having learned to unlatch the refrigerator door from the inside, would slip out and, leaving the door ajar, slurp across the kitchen floor, shinny up a leg of this very table, and devour its victims. Then it would slurp back again."

Here Mrs. McGargle drew four spoons from her apron pocket. "So our mystery is solved," she said. "All that's left is for justice to be done. Come, my dears, we must make the punishment fit the crime."

Polly MacDougal (nee Rettew), known to her young readers under the nom de plume Constanzia Delmar, tore the last page from the printer and frowned down at it. Was the ending a tad too gruesome? Not for the kids, of course, but for the editors of *The Mysterious Hornbook,* the children's magazine among whose stories of suspense and detection the adventures of Mrs. McGargle, the Granny Nanny lady, regularly appeared. She drummed her fingers on the thin stack of manuscript pages. Well, she'd see what Wallis thought.

As Polly closed the rolltop desk that hid the word processor, she heard a thump from the mud room and then another. She didn't stir her large form from the wooden swivel chair. Her husband had returned from his morning walk along the river.

In a moment, pausing only to turn on the gas under the kettle, Wallis MacDougal padded into the office in stocking feet. He was a small-boned, clean-shaven man with a steep forehead and thinning mouse-colored hair he wore a bit long in back as befitted a retired professor of American-Canadian studies at nearby Simon Cameron University. (He couldn't mention his specialty without telling everyone that back home in Canada it was called Canadian-American studies.) Years before, MacDougal had taken a teaching job in Pennsylvania so he could research the Lancaster County roots of Ontario's Amish settlements. In the process he married and settled in White Swan, his wife's hometown.

MacDougal hung his binoculars on the peg rack, gave Polly a

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bright look, and said, "The wood ducks are nesting along the river. There's henbit under the Zuch's hedge and—" He was about to underline the "and" with a raised index finger when he saw the finished manuscript. Since it fell to him to have the first look at anything his wife wrote, he sat right down and began to read.

Polly saw him frown over the first paragraph. Mrs. McGargle was not his favorite among her characters. He preferred H. H. Hopp, the rabbit private-eye whose adventures she regularly sold to *Hard-Boiled Humpty Magazine,* another children's publication, which, like *Godfather Goose,* favored more violent stories than *The Mysterious Hornbook.*

"I need a good title," remarked Polly, on her way to unlock the street door of the antique shop that occupied the front two rooms of their rambling house. As she reversed the sign in the window that said SHUT on one side and OPEN on the other, she wondered once again if he didn't suspect that he was the model for all her principal characters. Even the ever-smiling Mrs. McGargle's questioning manner aped her husband's sometimes patronizing way. Certainly his power of concentration—his voyages to the Isle of Man, as she called them, because he always stared up at a water stain on the living-room ceiling resembling that island in the Irish Sea—found a parallel in her rabbit creation. Hopp could sit for hours, upper lip atwitch, battered fedora stuck between his ears, a bottle of Wild Carrot at his elbow and an inch of that excellent amber liquid made from the fermented root of Queen Anne's lace in his glass, focusing his mental powers on the riddle of the moment by staring at that certain spot on the top of his bird's-eye-maple desk that most resembled the icy gaze of his arch-nemesis, the infamous Captain Gaylord Weasel.

Polly went back to the kitchen and made the tea. By the time she returned to the office with it, her husband had finished the manuscript. He tapped the top of the first page. "How about *Jello, She Wrote?"* he suggested.

Polly shook her head. "I need something with 'quivering lime-green death' in it." Then she demanded, "Wood ducks, henbit, and what else?"

"The hats have crossed the Rubicon," he replied. "They're halfway up the no-hundred block of West Market."

"God help us!" said Polly and meant it.

The first hat had appeared in the east end of town about the time the ice broke up in the river. One morning there it was, decorating

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Hester Groff's door, a broad-brimmed straw sunbonnet with paper flowers around the hatband and colored ribbon hanging down the back. The doors of the piano teacher's immediate friends were soon sporting hats of similar design. Before long, the shy Hester had opened her home to give demonstrations on door-hat making that drew women from all over town. After all, the house, an eccentric-looking place with one too many of everything—towers, turrets, bay windows, finials, and chimney pots— had its dark allure. The curious might never get another chance to see inside.

For the MacDougals, the spread of the hats through White Swan was like watching a flame race along a fuse. At the match end was the tall, long-chinned Hester, who was among the timidest, most fragile creatures under the sun. In the west end of town, like the keg of dynamite at the other end of that fuse, lived Polly's sister-in-law—short, stocky, quick-tempered Mrs. Winifred Rettew.

In years past, Winifred had seen herself as something of a social arbiter, having married one of the town's most popular and influential citizens. In fact, back in those days she'd staked her own claim on the town's doors by hanging out the first Christmas wreath, such things until then being rare in these parts. Winifred's boxwood decoration always wore a purple bow for Advent and then a happy red one until Epiphany. Others followed her example. But any wreath that appeared early or stayed up too long would draw a withering comment from Winifred. It was her game and she expected people to play by her rules.

Then, after her husband's early death, Winifred gradually lost interest in everything but her garden and church work. In a year or two, a few women dared to keep their wreaths up as long as the boxwood lasted, to ease the winter with a bit of green. When they weren't struck by lightning, others ventured into gingham bows. It was a small step then to wreaths of a furry manmade substance in a variety of colors and flocked with artificial snow, to bare straw wreaths bound round with ribbon and decked out with wooden cut-outs of old-fashioned Christmas-tree decorations, to ceramic wreaths hung with fruit and vegetables, and to plastic wreaths with geese, hens, and plaid Scotties. And the wreath frenzy that seized the town just wouldn't let go. When spring came, fresh ones appeared, brightly colored hoops of styrofoam or grapevine adorned with early flowers, feathers, and Easter eggs. Screen doors brought a measure of summer peace. But as soon as the first hard frost carried off the flies,

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wreaths of oak leaves, acorns, and pine cones announced that autumn had arrived.

Winifred hadn't seemed to care very much about the wreaths. In recent months her time had been taken up by the church building committee over which she presided. But the hats were something else again. And Hester Groff's hats at that! As they swept toward the center of town, driving the wreaths from door after door, Polly could sense her sister-in-law's restlessness, like a dragon rousing itself from dark slumber. For his part, MacDougal predicted Winifred would be compelled to do something once the hats had passed the Dog Leg, the Market Street jog that divided White Swan into east and west.

As they drank their tea, MacDougal tinkered with the inner workings of an old wind-up Henzler toy camel they had bought with a box of oddments at an auction of household goods. He hoped to use it to animate the shell of a Henzler elephant that had come to him in a trade several years before.

"I just damn well hope Hester knows what she's getting into," said Polly. During his first years at Simon Cameron, her husband and the reclusive piano teacher had exchanged letters. Hester's grandfather had had business dealings with Lamar Muffin, a local poet, landscape painter, and real-estate developer in whom MacDougal had become interested. Though not of the religion himself, Muffin had composed a long poem describing the migration of the Amish into the Kitchener-Waterloo area of southern Ontario. MacDougal had described her letters as effervescent. Polly thought he meant sparkling until he described Hester's practice of dotting her "i"s and making her periods with little circles and how it gave the page a bubbly look.

On their after-dinner walks through town, the MacDougals often stopped at the bottom of the two flights of cement steps that led up to Hester's front door to listen to her play a Chopin nocturne. Her husband had only had rare, quick glances of Hester as she ducked into a shop in town or disappeared around a corner, so after one of their walks Polly took down the picture box and found and uncurled the snapshot she'd taken of the famous wedding party on the steps of the church. Although a mist of overexposure had settled in on the groom's half of the picture, you could still make out Cecil Rettew looking businesslike in a hardware-store proprietor's kind of way with a more hard-edged Winifred standing at his side—small, dark,

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and wearing a terrible smile. Beside her, poised as if for flight, was Hester Groff, her maid-of-honor, trying to smile at the camera through eyes puffed up from crying, her fingers a blur at her bouquet.

Polly told Wallis about Winifred and Hester. The two had grown up as best friends. No one could make fun of Hester's fluttering eyelashes, poses, or high romantic ideas without feeling Winifred's fire. And anyone who wanted Hester's friendship had to tolerate Winifred's temper, sharp tongue, and sour view of things. Polly agreed with those who said the two young women improved in each other's company, Hester taking on more ballast and Winifred lighting up considerably. Their close relationship lasted until they became rivals for Cecil's heart. In the end it wasn't much of a contest. The same love that made Winifred blossom turned Hester into a caricature of herself. No rain fell without her in the middle of it bareheaded, no moonbeam but she sought it out.

Hester was overwhelmed when Cecil proposed to Winifred. She'd lost both the man she loved and her best friend. So when Winifred asked her to be her maid-of-honor she saw it as a peacemaking gesture. But Hester failed to appreciate that for Winifred a rival was an enemy. Even a defeated enemy had to be humiliated and driven from the field once and for all.

Winifred knew her victim well. When the organ sounded for the march down the aisle, Hester's brave front collapsed and she began to cry. She made the trip to the altar rail in tears, followed by a triumphant and smiling Winifred. "Victorious Roman generals were given lesser triumphants than that," observed MacDougal.

In fact, Polly believed this display of Winifred's vindictiveness marked the beginning of the end of her relationship with Cecil. Within a year or two, he had started dropping by to visit Hester. There was no secret about this. No one believed that anything more than friendship was involved. Cecil liked to talk and Hester liked to listen. Ironically, Cecil's fatal heart attack occurred on the Dog Leg. No one was ever able to say for sure whether he was on his way to visit Hester or coming back home to Winifred.

"Well, it's a pity it has to start up again," said MacDougal. "As I see it, things were just starting to work out for both the ladies involved."

Wallis meant Winifred's relationship with the new minister, the Reverend Herbert Glenwoodie, and Hester starting up again with Norval Wolgemuth, an old flame who'd returned to town after an absence of many years. Glenwoodie, an elderly widower and retired

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Army dentist, had a late vocation to the ministry, for which he had begun his studies while still in the service. He quickly showed himself to be a practical, straightforward man, one everyone found hard to dislike and easy to trust. Cant and unction had no part in his nature. Indeed, everything about him suggested he wouldn't be a widower for long. He had found the church in the throes of a building drive. Architect's renderings of the new church overflowed the vestibule bulletin board of the squat red-brick church in much the way the congregation had outgrown the old structure. Glenwoodie was soon spending a lot of time with Winifred, chairperson of the building committee.

Norval Wolgemuth came back to town not long after Glenwoodie's arrival. He had been the fourth person in the wedding photograph, Cecil's best man, who faced the lens of Polly's camera as though it was an approving mirror, so sure was he of his charm. In the months following that wedding, even those who didn't much like Wolgemuth had been happy he was around to tide Hester over the Cecil business. Then, just when it looked as though things were taking a serious turn, Wolgemuth picked up and left town with vague talk of job prospects elsewhere and coming back soon. There was a rumor that Winifred had loaned him the money to go. The way Winifred retold the story over the years, in any case, she had a lot of people believing Hester had actually been left at the altar.

During the years he was gone, Norval Wolgemuth had been involved in a number of jobs, schemes, and deals—projects from Mexican opals and Venezuelan diamonds to Florida real estate and a cream that was supposed to cure baldness. Nothing had ever amounted to anything. On one occasion that Polly knew of, his parents had made up a sizable shortage in company books with the understanding that Wolgemuth had received all the inheritance he could expect to get.

"I'll give Norval this," said Polly. "With all his wheeling and dealing, he's spent more time, effort, and just plain hard work on the track of easy money than any man I know." As she spoke, the cow bell over the front door clanked. "And still he came up dry," she added, pushing her swivel chair far enough across the floor to see into the shop. "Speak of the devil, it's cousin Wolgemuth," she whispered.

MacDougal raised his eyebrows. He was, Polly admitted, usually tolerant of her relatives, having a pretty strange collection of his own back up above the Forty-ninth parallel. But her husband didn't

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get along well with Norval because, she suspected, he insisted on calling him Wally, a name he could not abide.

Polly went into the shop and returned with her cousin. Though now in his sixties, Wolgemuth carried himself well. Except that he now concealed his long upper lip behind a weak moustache, he looked very much like the ghostly figure in the overexposed corner of the wedding photograph. His hair was full but grey and his pale features had lost their edge. He was a bit too carefully dressed and color-coordinated for a small town on a regular workday, and when he sat down he tugged slightly at his trouser knees to protect their crease. "I just dropped by to tell Polly here that I was leaving town," he said in a solemn voice.

"I'm surprised, Norval," said Polly. "I heard you'd taken up with Hester again. I figured you were here to stay."

He shook his head. "There's one fine woman for you," he said regretfully. "Talk about forgive and forget. And the deal fitted together as slick as they come. She's rattling around alone inside that big house with more than enough money to take care of herself. And, let's face it, here I am with Mother, God bless her, not long for this world, after which my brother and sister will sell the house and I'll be out on the street, alone with nothing but Social Security between me and the cold night wind. Hey, Hester knows all this—I've been up front with her. Still, the way I read the signs, if I propose she'll accept. I've been wrestling with—you know—whether that's the honorable thing to do."

"And you decided it wouldn't be?" asked Polly. "So you're leaving town?"

"I guess I decided it wasn't all that dishonorable," said Wolgemuth. "But I'm leaving, anyway." He made a sour face and looked away. "Yesterday Winifred gave me a jingle. Did I remember a certain letter I'd written Cec right after I left town, she wanted to know. I sure did and my blood ran cold." He cleared his throat, stared straight ahead as though looking in a mirror, and touched the knot of his tie. Then he said, "That letter was half a whistling-in-the-dark, half a burning-his-bridges thing written by a nervous young man setting out on uncharted waters. It was a putdown of the town in general and Hester in particular. I reeled off to Cec all the reasons why I didn't think she was the kind of wife for a man of my caliber. I said I was going places and traveling light." He smiled. "By gosh, that's funny. I still am. Well, the hell with it. So the breaks didn't come my way. I made my bed, I'll lie in it."

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MacDougal said, "Before you do, why not tell us about the phone-call?"

"She says if I'm not out of town by Friday I'll wish the hell I was because Hester will get the letter in the mail."

"Damn!" said Polly, striking her knee with a fist. "That's the Winifred we used to know and love. She just had to get even for the hats."

Wolgemuth nodded. "But I don't remember Cec being one to keep personal letters. I figured maybe she was bluffing. So yesterday I dropped around her place to see the goods. She was gardening out back, wearing that old thornproof tweed jacket of Cec's I'd always admired, the one he got so good a price on when we went to Philly lo these thirty years.

"When I asked to see the letter, 'Glad to oblige, Norval,' she said. 'Because it's you, I keep it in a very, very safe place." So she popped in the house and came right back with the damn thing. It was my letter, all right.

"She started to get real nasty about my settling my affairs and getting out of town. Then she stopped dead and got this idiot smile, and here comes the Reverend Glenwoodie around the house, carrying a bag of groceries. 'Hi there—Mr. Wolgemuth, isn't it?' he said. 'I'm giving Winifred her first cookout of the season.' He bounced the bag in his arms. 'Steak and all the trimmings. Care to join us?' But Winifred put an edge on her voice and said, 'Norval's got to run along like a good little boy.' That's just what I did."

"So she's got the letter," said Polly.

Wolgemuth nodded. "That's really why I'm here. You being a mystery writer and your husband the local know-it-all, I hoped you'd come up with some way for me to steal it back."

Bristling, MacDougal observed, "I'm surprised you need help in that department."

Wolgemuth turned red. He started to get up to leave. Then he sat down again. He looked away for a moment before saying bitterly, "But you see, Wally boy, I can only steal from people who trust me. Which Winifred doesn't."

"What say we all settle down," suggested Polly.

The two men stared at each other for a moment before MacDougal said, "All right, I suppose it could be argued that the letter rightfully belongs to you. Let's see what we can do. You say she popped inside for the letter. How long a pop? Long enough to go upstairs?"

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"Hey, maybe you've got something there," said Wolgemuth. "Not near that long."

"All right, the kitchen window's right there. Did she head straight through to the parlor or go left into the dining room?"

"Hey, as a matter of fact I didn't see her in the kitchen," admitted Wolgemuth. "But she'd have had to, right? Unless—"

"Unless she hid the letter in the mud room," suggested Polly. Like every other mud room in town, Winifred's contained a bench for the putting on and taking off of boots, pegs for coats, and the regulation old milk can with a screaming eagle painted on it for walking sticks and umbrellas.

MacDougal was up and walking back and forth in front of his chair, playing the thoughtful detective to the hilt. "Worth checking out," he said. "Norval should get there on the dot of three this afternoon. We'll provide a diversion. Now what does this letter look like?"

"Blue letter-paper written on both sides," said Wolgemuth. "Mother gave me this box of paper and envelopes. A going-away present. Maybe she hoped I'd write."

"A blue envelope helps," said MacDougal.

"Sorry about that," said Wolgemuth. "The envelope must've gotten lost along the way. She keeps the letter in one of those long white legal-sized envelopes, a used one with a stamp on it. But what's this all about?"

"I want to know it when I see it," said MacDougal. "If you draw a blank in the mud room, there's only one other possibility."

Late that afternoon, the MacDougals went for a walk. The sun was warm and the tulips were in full waxy bloom. Some hats had leapfrogged ahead and were already decorating doors in the west end of town. Old Mrs. Snell, ever the peacemaker, had devised a compromise rather like a wreath with a brim or a sunbonnet with a wreathy hatband.

"In primitive societies," observed MacDougal, "when the local priestess couldn't keep the devout up to the mark, a priestess of a new religion arose to challenge her."

"If you're talking about the Druids, I don't think mistletoe has much to fear from sunbonnets," suggested his wife.

They turned into the alley that led behind Winifred's house, a comfortable stucco residence with arched windows and doorways that gave it the hacienda look so popular in the Twenties. It stood

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on a large lot whose back yard sloped down toward the river, the end of the property marked by a grape arbor of stucco columns. Winifred was working at the far end of the yard, where things were badly overgrown. Walnut and mulberry saplings were hot, hard labor. She'd hung her tweed jacket over a handle of the wheelbarrow.

As the MacDougals came into the yard, Polly saw Wolgemuth round the corner of the house and slip into the mud room. Winifred was down on her knees wrestling with a deep-rooted walnut tree no thicker than a pencil. Cursing squirrels everywhere, she raged at the young tree. When MacDougal started forward to help, she waved him back. "It's my own fault," she said. "I should've taken care of this from the word go. Now it'll be the dickens to get out. I told Herbert—the Reverend Glenwoodie. I said some things are like a cancer. You have to cut them out root and branch. He just laughed because he didn't think I meant it."

She straightened up and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. Then she set to work again. "The rectory's blessed with this male mulberry tree, you see," she continued breathlessly. "No fruit. No messy birds doing their mulberry business all over Herbert's car—oh, no. I told him I knew what she was up to the minute those damn hats started popping up. I knew she was trying to knock me out of the box. I knew it was damn well her or, by God, me. But how would I do it? How? Then fate stepped in and gave me what I needed for another batch of Winnie's old tried-and-true cure-all medicine. You think I didn't use it?"

Throwing all her weight into uprooting the walnut sapling, she said through clenched teeth, "Last night when I told Herbert, boy, didn't he get up on his high horse. The hats were silly, a harmless fad, he said—next year it'd be sheep made out of popcorn or macrame umbrellas. Which shows how much he knows. He said I'd done a terrible thing and went off shaking his head like I'd really let him down. Oh, he'll come around to my way of thinking. He's a sensible man. Where would the world be if somebody didn't keep chasing simper and foolishness back into its mousy little den?"

Exhausted, Winifred let go the now slick, barkless wand of the walnut tree and sat back for a moment on her heels. Then she muttered, "Where's the blasted crowbar?" Struggling to her feet, she started back toward the house.

Thinking quickly, Polly said, "Hey, I think you've got a visitor. I just saw Norval Wolgemuth going up to your back door. He mustn't have seen us down here."

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Winifred looked up at the house. Frowning, she took two steps toward her jacket before stopping herself and smiling at the MacDougals. "Norval's come to say goodbye most likely," she said. "Didn't I hear he's leaving town again? Well, good riddance. Sorry, Polly, but your cousin makes me feel I should keep all my doors locked." She turned and headed back toward the house.

As they watched her go, MacDougal said, "Well, my love, Winifred has certainly made it clear to all of us that she doesn't trust Norval a bit. Now it seems to me that a mud room isn't a very safe place to hide anything."

"But that's where she went to get it."

"Suppose she had the letter with her but didn't feel safe him knowing that," said MacDougal, signaling Polly to stand between Winifred's line of sight and the wheelbarrow.

"You mean she just went into the mud room and came out again with the letter in her hand?" asked Polly.

MacDougal went through the pockets of the tweed jacket and grunted when he found a long envelope. As he looked inside to verify it was Wolgemuth's letter, he said, "She'd probably have made a better show of it and gone into the house, but she was expecting the Reverend Glenwoodie and wanted to speed Norval on his way."

Here Polly gave a sigh of relief as Wolgemuth emerged from the mud room and, seeing Winifred coming up the lawn, raised a hand in greeting. MacDougal slipped the envelope into his pocket and came up and stood beside her. Giving a little shudder, he added, "Maybe I've been too hard on Norval. It isn't all that easy stealing from people who trust you. In my own defense I have to say that Winifred isn't one of those who knows when to quit. Even if Norval left town she'd sooner or later see that Hester got the letter. That's just the way she is."

Norval and Winifred stood talking together for a moment. Then Norval disappeared around the corner of the house the way he'd come. When Winifred came back, the MacDougals talked to her for a few minutes more. Then they said goodbye and headed back down the alley. At the next corner, Wolgemuth was there waiting. He fell in step with them. "If the damn thing was in the mud room I sure couldn't find it," he said in a hopeless voice. "I guess that wraps it up."

"Not quite," said MacDougal, and, handing over the envelope, he explained how he'd come to look for it in the jacket.

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A smiling Wolgemuth listened until he was done and then handed the letter back. "Do me a favor. Burn it."

They walked another block or two in silence before Wolgemuth gave an emphatic nod and spoke again. "No, I mean it. I must be getting crazy in my old age. Yesterday I promised myself if I ever got my hands on that letter again I'd show it to Hester and make a try at explaining what was going on inside the head of the callow youth who wrote those dumb things. How crazy can a man get, right? No, I couldn't hurt Hester like that. Not even to get on the up-and-up with her after all these years. No, she's one of your hothouse flowers. Anyway, do me a favor. Burn the letter."

When they reached the town square, they stopped to say goodbye. Wolgemuth looked around him as though he'd just inherited every brick and shingle in eyeshot and wasn't about to sell. "Well, I guess I'll be seeing you around a lot," he said. "I better get over and see Hester. Faint heart ne'er won fair lady, right? Oh, and thanks a million for what you've just done for us, Wally. And you, too, Polly." He thought for a moment. "Hey, that's crazy," he laughed. " 'Polly and Wally MacDougal' like in the song!" Wolgemuth strode off down the street in an easterly direction whistling "Polly Wolly Doodle."

Polly lay a restraining hand on her husband's arm until the man was out of striking distance.

Old Mrs. Wolgemuth's obituary was in the next day's evening paper. Later that night Wolgemuth knocked on the MacDougal's back door. Polly offered her condolences as she led him into the living room, where her husband sat at a card table working to cure his elephant of its camel gait. Wolgemuth bowed at MacDougal's condolences and took the chair offered him. He sat there with his wrists on his knees, holding his hat by the brim and swinging it between his legs. He remained that way for several minutes. It seemed to Polly that sorrow gave him a touch of character.

Then he looked up and said, "I guess I just dropped by to say I'll be leaving town right after Mom's funeral." He waited for their surprised looks before continuing. "Yep," he said with a mournful nod, "I popped the question and Hester turned me down flatter than a pancake. Then she gave me both barrels, one for leaving town the way I did back then and the other for coming back after all these years like nothing had happened. Then she said she surely hoped I wasn't hanging around town on her account. Boy, aren't women crazy?"

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He seemed to be about to elaborate on this when he got another thought. "Hey," he said. "Winifred called and said she was sorry about Mom. She said she could understand how that would complicate my closing out things here and not to worry if it took me a few days longer than I said. That was considerate considering. But there's nothing to keep me here."

"But where will you go, Norval?" asked Polly.

Wolgemuth shrugged. "Greener pastures somewhere," he said. Then he gave a crooked smile. "Hey, remember the one where the guy says, 'If I knew I was going to live this long I'd've taken better care of myself'? That's Norval Wolgemuth. If I'd known I was going to end up alone I'd have made myself a better person to live with."

After Wolgemuth left, MacDougal made his wife a scotch and water, poured himself two fingers of bourbon, and sat back down and stared up at the water stain on the ceiling. Now and then Polly swore the shadow of a twitch would cross his nose. Suddenly he went over to the fireplace, in which the afternoon before he'd burned Wolgemuth's letter page by page. In the coal scuttle where they kept scrap paper for starting fires, he found the long envelope the blue pages had come in. He stared at it for a long moment before sitting down and returning to the Isle of Man.

When she couldn't stand it any longer, Polly ordered, "All right, spit it out."

"Not much to spit," said her husband. "This envelope's all we've got. But it wasn't just the first thing that came to hand for Winifred to keep the letter in. This is how Wolgemuth's letter arrived. The postmark's about two weeks after the hat business started. The address is printed to disguise a familiar handwriting. But the sender slipped up on that. See how the dots over the 'i's in Winifred are little circles?"

"But it doesn't make sense," insisted Polly. "First off, how would Hester come by a letter like that? Then why would she send it to Winifred?"

MacDougal shifted to a more comfortable position in his chair. "Probably Cecil gave it to her," he said, waving away her sounds of disbelief. "Now, listen—Hester was crushed when Wolgemuth left town. Cecil probably wanted to help her get him out of her system once and for all. Remember, Cecil's marriage to Winifred was no roaring success. Sometimes a man has to help a woman get rid of her troubles so he'll have someone to tell his troubles to."

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"But if Hester wanted Norval out of town why didn't she just tell him to hit the road?"

"You've damn well got me there," admitted MacDougal, collecting their glasses and heading back to the bar.

Later that month during the MacDougals' after-dinner walk, as they slowed down to pick their way over the cockeyed cement, one of the many places in the older end of town where tree roots had shouldered their way up through sidewalk, they heard Hester Groff's piano. Her nocturnes had become a triumphant polonaise. Then up ahead they saw the Reverend Glenwoodie with a bag of groceries. They waved, but before he saw them he had turned to mount Hester's steps. Evidently she was about to get a steak on the grill.

"Well, damn it, there we are," said MacDougal in amazement. "That's all it was. Hester started the hats to get Winifred's dander up. Then she faked a reconciliation with Wolgemuth. Then she sent the letter, knowing that Winifred, being Winifred, would have to use it."

"And using it would cost her the Reverend Glenwoodie," said Polly. "Well, I guess revenge is sweet."

"Sweet maybe, but cheap it ain't," observed her husband. "Thirty years of hating someone that much can stunt a person's growth. I'll be surprised if Hester keeps the Reverend Glenwoodie any longer than Winifred did."

Before they got back home, Polly MacDougal was working on her next story. She had tentatively entitled it "The Porches of Autumn" and imagined it would begin this way:

"Looking sleek and elegant in his rich brown overcoat, Woodrow Wilson Woodchuck, among the most prominent worthies of Forest Glen, hurried down the main street of that cozy wildlife community. He was not unmindful that all the burrow entrances were decked out for autumn with stooks of corn, wheelbarrows of squash, sheets made into ghosts, and, of course, on porch swings and steps everywhere, the pumpkin people. The traditional scarecrows he could understand. But for the life of him Woodrow couldn't see the pleasure animals found in this new rage of dressing up their porches with human overalls and shirts stuffed with straw and topped with jack-o'-lantern heads. In the few short days since that first one had appeared before the neat little burrow of shy Miss Vivian Vole, the pumpkin people had grown into an army. Looking at them now,

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Woodrow, who was well read and much traveled, experienced a *frisson*, a cold shudder of fear. Strange how each head, each menacing triangular eye, tended toward the Widow Badger's end of town and how every straw-filled glove lay close to a weapon, be it pitchfork, flail, sickle, or rusty old shotgun. He shook his head and hurried on, having troubles of his own.

"Woodrow turned in at number 22B Bunny Drive, where the sign on the gate read H. H. HOPP, PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS. In a moment he stood warming his hands before a comfortable fireplace, his fawn coatsleeves pulled up above his wrists. Speaking over his shoulder to the animal in the fedora lounging behind the desk, he continued, 'My dear Hippity, of course you're right. I've made a hash of things. One should never put one's feelings down on paper. But it was years ago. I was young and impetuous. I'm counting on you to get the letter back . . . ' "

Here Polly stopped. She wasn't sure about *frisson*. The *Hard-Boiled Humpty* people liked you to increase their young readers' vocabulary, too. But they preferred words like moxie, stool pigeon, and flatfoot. Suddenly she smiled. A better title had popped into her mind. "The Revenge of the Pumpkin People," by Constanzia Delmar. Yes, the kids would like that.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

MUDDY MOTIVE

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A writer filled a vacant lot
With the bodies of victims he'd shot.
When caught and arraigned,
He calmly explained,
"I was just trying to thicken the plot."

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"You just had a phone call here from Ken Negas," the sergeant told Detective First-Class Sammy Monfredo. "He needs to see you right away. Emergency."

"At his place?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'm on my way." Sammy switched off the speaker, wondering what was so urgent that his snitch would phone him like that . . .

THE URGENT MESSAGE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a chilly evening in early spring when Detective First-Class Sammy Monfredo took the call on the radio of his unmarked car. He knew Sergeant Connie Trent was off duty that night so he wasn't surprised to hear Anne Foster's voice. "This is Sergeant Foster, calling car 107." The one-hundred series were the unmarked cars.

"I hear you, Anne. What's up?"

"Something a bit odd. You just had a phone call here from Ken Negas." Sammy cursed her silently for putting that name on the air. Negas was one of his snitches and a lot of people listened to police calls. "He needs to see you right away. Emergency."

"At his place?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'm on my way." He switched off the speaker, wondering what was so urgent that Negas would phone him like that.

The pawnbroker lived above his shop on the fringe of downtown and had been supplying information to the police for almost ten years. Sammy Monfredo had found his information generally reli-

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able, especially concerning robberies. Even when the perpetrators didn't come directly to Negas with their ill-gotten goods, he usually knew about their crimes and where they could be found.

Sammy parked the unmarked car a block away, hoping the wrong ears hadn't caught Sergeant Foster's indiscreet radio call. The street was nearly deserted, dirty with the dregs of recently melted snow in a neighborhood where the city felt no compulsion to clean the gutters with any regularity. Sammy glanced in the darkened windows of Negas' pawnshop as he went by, seeing only the small naked lightbulb aglow above the safe at the rear of the shop. He paused before the door to the stairs that led to the second-floor apartment and, glancing around casually, pressed the buzzer. There was no one visible within a block in either direction.

The door buzzed, releasing the lock, and he went quickly upstairs. The apartment door itself was ajar, as it always was for these evening visits. Usually Negas preferred to meet him elsewhere, though—in some remote area of the city where neither would be known.

"Ken? Are you here?" Sammy asked, pushing open the door. The apartment was dimly lit and very hot. He wondered if the thermostat had malfunctioned. "Ken?"

"In here, Sammy."

"They told me you called. What's so urgent?" Sammy walked toward the voice, unable to see him clearly in the dim light.

"I've got something for you."

"Information?"

"No, this."

Then Sammy saw the swarthy little pawnbroker outlined against the moonlit window. His right arm was outstretched, coming up steadily, holding a long-barreled silver revolver that caught and reflected what light there was.

"My God, Ken! Put that down!" Sammy dropped to one knee, tugging the service revolver from his belt holster.

"I owe you this, Monfredo," the other man rasped, the revolver following Sammy.

Sammy fired one shot and Negas spun half around, toppling backward to the floor. Sammy got to his feet, breathing hard, and snapped on the overhead light. His bullet had hit Negas in the chest and the man was close to death. He bent close so his voice would be heard and asked, "Why'd you try such a crazy thing, Ken?"

The man coughed once, bringing blood to his lips, and then he was

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silent. Sammy shook his head sadly and holstered his revolver. He looked at the gun on the floor near Negas' outstretched fingers. It seemed blurred and indistinct, not silver at all but more like—

He bent to touch it and his fingers came away chilled.

Ken Negas had tried to shoot him with a gun made of ice.

Captain Leopold had been summoned at once, as he always was when a detective or police officer killed a civilian. The press had been very vocal about such matters in recent years, especially if the victim was a member of some minority. Ken Negas had been a fixture in the city's underworld for years and hardly would have considered himself a minority, but he had a Spanish-sounding name and that would be enough for the media.

"Why is it so hot in here?" Leopold asked Lieutenant Fletcher as he entered the apartment over the pawnshop. "Somebody open a window!"

He stared down at the body of Ken Negas, remembering the times he'd been forced to bring the man in for questioning, even when he was already acting as a paid informer for Detective Monfredo. "What happened here, Fletcher?"

"Near as I can tell, Negas phoned Headquarters a little after seven and said he had to see Monfredo right away. When Sammy got here, Negas was waiting for him with a gun, or at least it looked like a gun to Sammy. The light was quite dim. Sammy fired in self-defense, hitting Negas in the chest. He died within minutes, without making a statement."

"Where's the weapon?" Leopold asked, glancing around.

"What's left of it is in the freezer, Captain."

"What?"

"The gun was made out of ice, molded in the shape of a long-barreled .38 revolver. When Sammy discovered that, I guess he went into shock or something. He just left it on the floor to melt in this heat. See the water stain here on the carpet? When I arrived, I put what was left in an evidence bag and stuck it in the freezer."

"Where's Monfredo now?"

"In the bedroom, making a preliminary statement to Connie."

The bedroom door was ajar and Leopold pushed it open wider to enter. Connie Trent sat with Sammy on the side of the bed, taking notes. The room's furnishings looked tired and used. The lumpy bed itself was covered with a faded pink spread. "Hello, Sammy," Leopold greeted the ashen-faced young man. Monfredo was in his early thir-

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ties, a good if unimaginative detective. He had a pretty wife named Jennifer and two small daughters Leopold had met at a Christmas party. "What's been going on?"

"I thought he was going to shoot me, Captain. Why would anyone do such a crazy thing? He was asking to be killed!"

Leopold nodded. "Go ahead, finish giving your statement to Connie. I'll talk to you later."

He went into the kitchen and opened the freezer door of the refrigerator, recognizing it as an inexpensive model from the previous decade. If Ken Negas had been making any big money, he certainly wasn't spending it on living quarters or home furnishings. "That's it, Captain," Fletcher confirmed from the doorway as Leopold lifted the evidence bag from the freezer.

Despite its half melted state, Leopold could clearly see that it had once had the shape of a revolver. "Get a larger bag and fill it with ice," he instructed Fletcher. "Then put this bag inside it. We don't want any more of it melting before we get it downtown."

There was gloom around Headquarters, as there always was following such a killing. No one faulted Monfredo for having fired at the man under the circumstances, but everybody knew the questions the papers would be asking. How could he have mistaken a piece of ice for a real weapon? Why didn't he merely shoot to wound rather than to kill? What possible motive could the dead man have had?

Leopold read over Sammy's statement for the second time and then summoned Anne Foster to his office. Anne was a slender, brown-haired young woman, above average in height and quite serious in demeanor. She'd been with the Department about three years. Leopold admired her quick wits and efficiency. "Sit down, Anne," he said, indicating the chair opposite his desk. "Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I go off at midnight and I can't sleep if I have coffee too late in the evening."

"You should try decaffeinated."

She shook her head. "It's not the same."

He nodded. "You took the call from Ken Negas?"

"That's right, Captain. He seemed agitated and insisted I get a message to Detective Monfredo right away. I knew he was one of the paid informants so I guessed it was important."

"Monfredo's statement says you called him on the police radio."

"I tried his home first but he wasn't there yet. Even though I had

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to mention Negas' name, I figured the message was harmless enough."

"You say Negas sounded agitated. Was he incoherent at all?"

She considered her reply. "I wouldn't say incoherent, just very excited."

"Thank you, Anne. That's all for now."

It was a formality that personnel involved in fatal shootings were suspended or given desk jobs until the routine investigation was complete. In Monfredo's case, he'd surrendered his weapon so that bullets fired from it could be compared with the one removed from Negas' chest. Leopold called him in to tell him he'd be working in the communications room until further notice.

"Well, it's better than a suspension," the detective remarked.

"You can learn how to operate the new fax machine," Leopold said. The Department had used money from a government grant to purchase an expensive plain-paper fax machine whose speed and resolution were the envy of other branches of city government.

Monfredo nodded with a touch of irony.

"What were you working on with Negas?"

"Nothing recently. I hadn't talked with him in over a month. The last information he supplied was about the robbery at the Yacht Club in January. I followed up and nabbed the perpetrators."

"And that's all wrapped up?"

"Sure. Lorenz Lasco and Big Brian Korol are awaiting trial. I hear their lawyer is trying to plea bargain."

"Negas was satisfied with what you paid him? No dispute over money?"

"Nothing, Captain."

"Exactly what did he say when you walked into the apartment?"

"He said he had something for me. He said he owed it to me. Then he raised the gun. What I thought was a gun."

Leopold shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. None of it makes sense."

"Unless he *wanted* me to kill him."

"But why?" Leopold asked.

By the following morning there was a partial answer to that question. The autopsy on the pawnbroker's body showed that Ken Negas had been suffering from advanced heart disease. He probably had less than a year to live at the moment he chose to die at Sammy Monfredo's hand.

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"Then that's it," Connie Trent said, reading the report Leopold had handed her.

"Not quite. There are some unanswered questions, Connie."

"Like why he'd go through this whole charade rather than simply shoot himself in the head? Maybe he couldn't get a gun."

"Did you ever hear of a pawnbroker who couldn't get a gun? He probably had some right downstairs in his safe."

"Then he was afraid to use one on himself. Some people are."

Leopold leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling, trying to put words to the thoughts clustering in his mind. "I think Negas wanted to die, all right, but he wanted to take Sammy down with him. He apparently didn't want to kill him, because he could have done that easily. He wanted to discredit him, to frame him for killing an unarmed civilian without cause."

"You're just speculating now?"

"Not completely. Consider this, Connie—what was the first thing any of us noticed about Negas' apartment?"

"I don't know—" She thought. "It was hot!"

"Exactly. It was hot. Too damned hot. The thermostat had been turned above eighty."

"Maybe he liked it hot. We know now that he was very ill."

"Or maybe he wanted to make certain the revolver made of ice would melt before we arrived."

"I should have thought of that," Connie said.

"I think it's the most likely reason for the apartment being overheated. A man planning to die doesn't worry about being a little chilly. In fact, it could be argued that he'd shut off the heat entirely to keep the ice from melting too soon and spoiling the illusion."

"No matter how fast it melted, Sammy would eventually have seen that it was ice. He *did* see it."

"And who would believe such a fantasy? Certainly not the press. Sammy was lucky Fletcher had sense enough to pop it into the freezer before it was gone." Leopold leaned forward. "And there's another thing. There had to be a mold of some sort for freezing that gun. We haven't found it. Negas disposed of it, of course, because its discovery would have supported Sammy's story."

They discussed every aspect of it, but the thing still didn't make a great deal of sense. If they now knew why Ken Negas had been willing to die—because he was a dead man anyway—they still didn't know why he'd tried to discredit Sammy Monfredo.

They were still talking twenty minutes later when Sergeant Am-

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brose from Internal Affairs stuck his head in the door. "Got a minute, Captain?" he asked, interrupting Connie in mid-sentence. The Internal Affairs people never felt anyone else's confidence was as important as theirs.

Connie excused herself and returned to her desk. Ambrose sat down, clutching a file folder in a way that suggested he was about to spring a surprise on Leopold. "I want to talk about Detective Monfredo."

"It looks like a setup, Ambrose. That pawnbroker, Negas, wanted to die. He was fatally ill."

"So I hear. That doesn't change the fact that your man killed him." He got up and closed the door to Leopold's office.

Leopold frowned. "What are you getting at? What's Internal Affairs got to do with Sammy Monfredo?"

"He was assisting us in an ongoing investigation."

Leopold studied Ambrose, taking in his small, penetrating eyes and grim lips. He wondered if the man ever smiled. Perhaps he did when he brought an officer up on departmental charges. "What's the problem?" he asked. "Some of my people been stealing apples again?"

Ambrose didn't smile, but Leopold hadn't expected him to. "The matter is a bit more serious than that, Captain. A number of items, including weapons, have disappeared from the property clerk's office in recent months. It's serious enough that we've been conducting a full-scale investigation."

"You suspect Sammy?"

Ambrose shook his head. "Detective Monfredo was to have been our chief witness before the grand jury. This incident last night is bound to discredit him. It might ruin our whole case. Even if no charges are brought over the Negas killing, it'll appear that Monfredo's testimony is in return for letting him off the hook."

Leopold tried to remain calm. "Why is Internal Affairs conducting such an investigation without notifying me? Am I one of your targets?"

"Certainly not, or I wouldn't be speaking to you like this now. But you must realize the Commissioner's position. Just last year there was a scandal involving another captain in the Department—"

"I know. You may remember I broke that case."

"I didn't come here looking for a fight, Captain. I want to know where we stand in this Negas affair."

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"I have no reason to believe it involves your investigation in any way."

"No?" Ambrose opened the file he'd been clutching. "It was Detective Monfredo who gave us our first break in the case. He discovered that some of the items missing from the police-property clerk's office were for sale at Ken Negas' pawnshop."

Leopold finished looking over the list of items Sergeant Ambrose had handed him. They were the usual stereos and cameras recovered from robbery suspects, awaiting the outcome of a trial or plea-bargain before being returned to the owners. He glanced up at Ambrose. "This is small-time stuff."

"These are just the items Monfredo identified after a quick look around the shop. There are also several firearms missing, and a quantity of cocaine."

"So Negas was playing both sides of the street, acting as informer while still plying his trade as a fence for stolen goods."

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"Sammy told me nothing about this."

"He was under orders not to say anything, even to his superior officers."

"You must have some suspects in mind," Leopold said.

"One of the property clerks is under investigation, but we don't think he's in it alone."

"How could he hope to get away with such a thing on a regular basis?"

"A great many cases drag on for years and never come to trial. The owners of the property die or move away or just forget to claim it. Most of the stolen items were from long-dormant cases. It just happened that one of them came to life unexpectedly and the evidence was missing."

Leopold was depressed following his conversation with Sergeant Ambrose. He had enough problems without Internal Affairs creating more. After thinking about it for a few minutes, he went down the hall to Communications and found Sammy Monfredo trying to look interested while Anne Foster instructed him in the operation of the new fax machine.

"The less expensive machines feed the paper off a roll," she explained, "but this laser-printed model uses plain paper in ordinary flat sheets. You can transmit and receive documents and even photographs between any two machines on earth as simply as making

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a phone call. The entire transmission goes over the telephone wires in just a few seconds. For example, if you needed a ten-page report from Interpol in Paris you could phone them and have it in a couple of minutes. Even enlargements of fingerprints can be transmitted with a high degree of resolution."

Sammy looked up as he saw Leopold in the doorway. "Is this what I'm going to be doing from now on, Captain? Running this machine?"

"Only until the investigation is complete," Leopold tried to reassure him. "Can I speak with you for a moment, Sammy?"

"Sure, Captain." He followed Leopold into the hall.

"Sergeant Ambrose from Internal Affairs was just in to see me."

"Oh?"

"He told me about the problem in the property room."

"I suppose I should have come to you—"

"No, that's all right. Do you feel that Ken Negas' death had anything to do with the Internal Affairs investigation?"

"How could it?"

"Did you ever talk to Negas about it?"

"Never."

"But you found some things in his pawnshop."

"I was with him one day and he got a call on the telephone. I started nosing around and spotted some things from the property room's list of missing articles. One VCR had a serial number that was one I'd memorized."

"Negas never told you he was receiving stolen goods?"

Sammy Monfredo leaned a hand against the wall, looking uneasy. "Well, Captain, I'm on the Violent Crimes squad. The information I was paying him for involved murder and felonious assault. I wasn't interested in simple robberies and he knew that."

"But you reported back to Internal Affairs about the items you'd found."

"Yeah, well, it seemed that was something involving the whole department. If Joe was running a scam—"

"Joe Sanbrow, the property clerk? He's the one they suspect in this thing?"

"The thefts were so widespread, they don't see how one of the part-time people could have done it." A patrolman came along the hall and Sammy shut up until he'd passed out of earshot. Then he added, "But that's not my concern. They can pin it on whoever they want."

"If someone was trying to set you up, negate your testimony before

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you ever appeared before the grand jury, this would be a good way to do it. And with Ken Negas dead there's no one else to say a word."

Monfredo had grown pale as Leopold spoke. "Who could have talked Negas into doing such a thing?"

"I don't know," Leopold replied, "but maybe you do. Think about it."

Leopold found an excuse to visit the property room later that morning, to refresh his memory about Joe Sanbrow. He knew the man only slightly, since it was routine for Fletcher or Connie to turn in the evidence from one of his cases. Sanbrow was a medium-sized man with eyeglasses and a receding hairline. He was in his mid-thirties and was popular around Headquarters—Leopold had heard his name mentioned frequently when the talk turned to parties or off-duty drinking.

"Hello, Captain," he said as Leopold approached the counter of the property room. A big red-lettered sign above the counter gave careful instructions for the proper recording of evidence. "What can I do for you?"

"We've got the remains of a piece of ice shaped like a gun that was found at the Negas shooting last evening. Do you have a freezer here? We've already photographed it."

Sanbrow shook his head. "Nothing like that. The lab has one, though. They'll have to keep it for you."

Leopold seemed to consider it. "Well, there's a small refrigerator in the squad room with a compartment for ice-cube trays. That's where it is now. I suppose we could just leave it there."

"Good idea," Sanbrow agreed. "How's Sammy taking it?"

"Pretty well. I've assigned him to Communications until this blows over."

"Wish him luck for me," the property clerk said, shifting the holster on his belt.

Leopold had been back in his office only a few moments when Fletcher came in, looking unhappy. "This case is screwy, Captain. Remember Lasco and Korol, the two men who robbed the Yacht Club and beat the manager half to death?"

Leopold nodded. "They fenced a gold trophy to Ken Negas and he snitched on them to Sammy. When I was questioning Sammy he said it was the last contact he had with Negas."

"Well, we've traced some of the other stolen goods to a fence in New York. Negas used him for jewelry he couldn't unload locally.

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The thing is, the list of items recovered by the cops down there includes some pieces of jewelry that aren't from the Yacht Club heist. They're from the Maybrick robbery over a year ago."

Leopold frowned. "That case is closed. The entire loot was recovered. It should have been returned to the estate by now."

"It disappeared from our property room, Captain. I've been hearing rumors, and maybe you have, too—"

Leopold cut him short. Much as he trusted Fletcher he didn't want to get into the Internal Affairs matter with him quite yet. "Who are you dealing with in New York?"

"Lieutenant Miller at One Police Plaza."

"Get him on the phone. I'll talk to him."

Miller proved to be a gruff-voiced man who came right to the point. "I understand we got some jewelry belongs up there, Captain."

"Looks like it. Tell me about it."

Miller started reading off a few of the items, then asked, "You got a fax machine up there, Captain? I could send you a copy of the whole list, along with a statement by the fence who received the stolen merchandise."

"We've got a brand-new machine. Send it along."

"What's your phone number?"

Leopold automatically started giving the Headquarters number, then realized his error. "You mean the special number for the fax machine?"

"Right."

"I'll have to get that. Hold on." He dialed the communications room on his other phone and spoke to Anne Foster. "Anne, what's our fax number? We've got something coming up from New York on the Negas case."

She gave it to him and he passed it on to Lieutenant Miller. Five minutes later Sammy Monfredo delivered the pages to his desk. "Here you are, Captain. I took them out of the machine myself."

Leopold smiled. "You've found a home in Communications, Sammy."

"Fat chance," Sammy said.

Leopold gave the list to Fletcher and then scanned the NYPD arrest report. Near the bottom of the sheet was a brief summary of the fence's statement: *"Suspect states the jewelry was brought to him by a Connecticut man with whom he'd dealt in the past. Man used*

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the name of Jack Sand and is described as of medium height and build, age about thirty-five, dark hair receding in front, eyeglasses."

He read it over twice and put down the sheet. It was a description of Joe Sanbrow from the property room. This was the final piece of evidence Sergeant Ambrose needed.

He sat looking at it for another moment, clinically admiring the layout of the arrest form the NYPD used. The initial information apparently had been typed in by the arresting officer, with the summary of the suspect's statement added later. He read the description one more time, then lifted the phone and dialed the number of Internal Affairs. Ambrose answered.

"This is Leopold. I've got something—"

Ambrose cut him short. "I can't talk now, Captain. Joe Sanbrow just shot himself in his office!"

Sanbrow had fallen out of his swivel chair and lay behind his desk, obviously dead from a gunshot wound in the head. A long-barreled target pistol with a silencer was on the floor, inches from his outstretched fingers. Leopold looked at it and said, "A hit man's weapon. Where'd it come from?"

Fletcher recognized it. "Evidence in the Carlyle case. It was stored here waiting for the D.A. to request it."

"Is Sanbrow's service revolver on his belt?"

Fletcher bent to lift the body slightly. "It's here," he confirmed.

"Who found him?" Leopold asked Sergeant Ambrose.

"Patrolman Wolfe, I think. He came in with some evidence from a stolen car. Sanbrow wasn't at the counter, so he looked in the office and found him. He'd only been dead a few minutes."

"Shot in the right temple," Leopold said, half to himself. "Was he right-handed?"

Several of the men standing around said that he was. All of them had seen bodies before, but this was one of their own and they seemed unable to function properly. A doctor had been called and pronounced him dead, but nothing else was happening. It was Leopold who finally said, "I want pictures of everything. Get the technical people down here."

"For a suicide?" Ambrose asked.

Leopold didn't answer. Instead, he turned to Fletcher. "Get Sammy Monfredo to my office on the double."

"What's going on?" Ambrose demanded.

"I'll tell you shortly."

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Leopold hurried downstairs to his office, arriving just as Fletcher brought Sammy in. "What's going on, Captain? Is it true Joe Sanbrow killed himself? The word's all over the building."

"It's true he's dead." Leopold held up the sheets of paper from the NYPD. "Tell me about these, Sammy. Tell me everything."

"I don't—"

"Tell me everything you did in Communications for the past hour."

Sammy scratched his head. "Well, I took my coffee break and went down the hall to the machine. While I drank it, I chatted with Connie at her desk, then I went back to Communications. Anne told me there'd be a fax message coming through from New York and I was to deliver it to your office as soon as I had it. The machine beeped and started up. Anne had gone out to the ladies' room, so I was alone with it. As soon as the transmission was finished, I brought it to you."

"Who told you about Sanbrow killing himself?"

"One of the girls called Anne to tell her."

Leopold showed him the NYPD arrest report with the description of Sanbrow. "You didn't warn him when this came in?"

"No—I didn't even read it!"

"Could Anne Foster have warned him?"

"She never saw it. She was out of the room when the transmission began."

"All right," Leopold said. "Go back to Communications. I may want you again later."

He sat tapping a pencil against the edge of his desk, feeling it was all right there in front of him if he could only put the pieces in their proper order. Murder and suicide. A weapon of ice and a weapon that was unnecessary. Robbery at the Yacht Club and robbery from the police property room. A bad cop, maybe two bad cops.

He read over the fax material from New York again.

How had Sanbrow known he was going to be implicated?

He studied the summary of the fence's statement at the bottom of the arrest report. As Leopold had noticed earlier, it was written in a slightly different typeface, apparently at a later time. He decided to ask Lieutenant Miller in New York about that.

It took some time for them to find Miller but presently Leopold heard his gruff voice on the other end of the line. "How are things up there, Captain? I hope the fax transmission was better the second time."

Leopold held the phone away from his ear and stared at it. Sud-

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denly he knew all the answers, and he only had to ask Miller some questions to verify them.

Just after lunch, when the furor over Sanbrow's death had died down a bit, Leopold summoned Sergeant Ambrose to his office. "I believe I can wind this matter up if you'll allow me. You see, the two deaths are closely linked."

"You mean the murder of Negas and the suicide of Joe Sanbrow?"

Leopold smiled grimly. "You have it backward, Sergeant. I mean the suicide of Ken Negas and the murder of Sanbrow."

"You'd better explain yourself."

"Gladly." Leopold leaned back in his chair, seeing he had the man's complete attention. "Ken Negas was terminally ill and he was persuaded to kill himself in a manner that would discredit Detective Monfredo and hamper your investigation of the property-room thefts."

"Persuaded by whom? Joe Sanbrow?"

"I'm getting to that, but it wasn't Sanbrow. It was someone else—the same person who murdered Sanbrow this morning."

"You'll have to prove that to me."

"We saw the body, and the weapon he supposedly used—a long-barreled target pistol made even longer by a silencer. It was one of several weapons in his custody, but certainly they were kept unloaded. We are asked to believe that Joe Sanbrow decided to commit suicide, that he selected this particular weapon from those in his custody, that he loaded it with the proper ammunition, and that he then placed the extra-long barrel against his right temple and pulled the trigger—all this, mind you, while his loaded .38 special was in a holster on his belt. Don't you see? The target pistol was an unnecessary weapon."

"It had a silencer," Ambrose pointed out. "Maybe that's why he used it."

"There's no reason in this instance for a suicide to use a silencer. Though of course there's a very good reason for a murderer to use one—so he could be out of the property office and far away before the body was discovered."

"Sanbrow just allowed the killer to load this weapon in front of him?"

"I believe the gun was taken earlier, perhaps while weapons were being stolen from the room. The killer kept it for just such an even-

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tuality, loaded it, and went into the office this morning with it hidden in a file folder or newspaper."

Ambrose glanced down at the file folder in his own lap. "Who *was* this person?"

"Sanbrow's partner in the thefts from the property room, of course. The person who arranged their disposal through Ken Negas and the fence in New York. The person who used a relationship with the dying Negas to persuade him to discredit Sammy Monfredo by framing him for the shooting. The person who could dream up a weapon of ice and a gimmicked fax machine on a moment's notice."

There was a knock on the door and Anne Foster came in. "Fletcher said you wanted to see me, Captain."

"I do, Anne. Sergeant Ambrose and I have some very serious questions to ask you."

Connie kept shaking her head in disbelief. "Anne Foster a murderer? A thief? I can't believe it."

"She'd been helping Sanbrow with his racket for some time. I suppose she'd gotten to know Negas through his informer work for Sammy, and she started selling the stuff to him. He put her onto the New York fence who bought jewelry. When Ambrose and Internal Affairs started sniffing around, she knew Sammy might discover her part in it. Negas told her he was dying and she persuaded him to help discredit Sammy. She lured Sammy to Negas' place with that radio call. Unfortunately for her, the ice gun didn't melt as fast as she'd hoped. Still, Negas was dead and Sanbrow was the only other one who knew her part in the affair. She decided to get rid of him, too, in a more direct way. She stole the silenced weapon and waited for an opportunity. It came this morning, sooner than she'd expected."

"But Sammy was working with her all morning," Connie protested.

"Not quite. I phoned to ask her our fax number, and told her something was coming through from New York. When she saw what it was, she realized this was her opportunity. The original arrest report contained no summary of the fence's statement. If it had, he would have described Anne Foster, not Sanbrow. She quickly typed up those extra lines, positioning them near the bottom of a sheet of plain paper. Then she inserted it as the top sheet in the paper feed of the fax machine. It took her less than a minute, while Sammy Monfredo was on his coffee break. Then she phoned New York, told

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them there were some lines missing, and asked them to repeat the transmission. Sammy came back, she left, and he received the doctored fax, which he delivered to me."

"When did she kill Sanbrow?"

"Then, while Sammy thought she was in the ladies' room. She walked upstairs with the previously stolen gun loaded and hidden in a folder or newspaper. She went into Sanbrow's office and shot him with the silenced gun. The idea was that the body might not be found for an hour or so and we'd think he'd somehow gotten word of the incriminating message. With his death written off as suicide, we'd never check back with NYPD on the authenticity of the message."

"But you did check back."

"Oh, yes. If Anne continues to deny it all, the fence in New York is quite ready to identify her. And we have the doctored message itself, with the addition made on her electric typewriter."

"She's clever," Connie said.

"Clever, yes, I suppose. But the timing was all against her."

"The timing?"

"Yes. The gun didn't melt fast enough and Sanbrow's body was found too soon."

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DETECTIVERSE

CUPID AND CUPIDITY

by MONICA DALE

It wasn't the smartest thing that I've done—
Getting involved with Enemy One.
Once a robber, always a thief—
Blinded by love, I suffered such grief.
I'd fallen for him on our very first date
When he lifted the silver from Auntie's estate.
I told myself that things could be worse
When I found that he'd emptied my wallet and purse.
So he'd stolen a few of my worldly possessions—
I could forgive such minor transgressions.
I could live without furs, who needs a Mercedes?
But then I found out that he had other ladies!
Not satisfied with my diamonds and pearls,
The cad, he did it with all of the girls!
Gone was my trust, with my cash and my credit,
Although I once loved him, I lived to regret it.
No, falling for robbers is not very smart,
For, alas, the scoundrel had stolen my heart.

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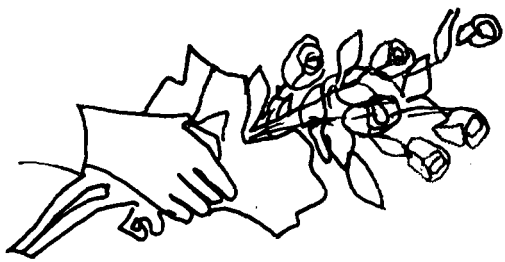

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an Annals of Medicine reprint by

BERTON ROUECHÉ

Through the years we've been asked many times by many readers why we don't reprint one of Berton Roueché's medical detections from The New Yorker*—a collection of which won him a special Raven from the Mystery Writers of America in 1954. And so we have selected one which shows the careful forensic and police work that leads to a conviction for murder. While it and all Annals of Medicine pieces are nonfiction, Mr. Roueché told Sam Staggs for* Publishers Weekly *in 1986 that in choosing fictitious names for the patients he writes about, he uses the surnames of musicians in the original Count Basie band, which was very big in Kansas City when he was growing up there. Since he has always been a jazz fan, he enjoys naming a patient Mr. Tate, say, for Buddy Tate, or Mrs. Young, for Lester Young, and so on.*

Following "The Prognosis for This Patient Is Horrible" is a short story by this versatile author, also reprinted from The New Yorker . . .

THE PROGNOSIS FOR THIS PATIENT IS HORRIBLE

by BERTON ROUECHÉ

At around two o'clock on the afternoon of Tuesday, September 12, 1978, an eleven-month-old boy named Chad Shelton, the only child of Bruce Shelton, a television repairman, and his wife, Sallie Betten Shelton, was admitted to Immanuel Medical Center in Omaha, Nebraska, for evaluation of persistent vomiting. Chad, his parents told the admitting physician, had been vomiting off and

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on for two days—since early Sunday evening. They added that they, too, had become sick Sunday evening, with severe abdominal cramps, diarrhea, and vomiting, but had now pretty well recovered.

The determination of the cause of an ailing infant's illness can be a serious diagnostic challenge. The diagnostician, being unable to elicit any account of how the patient feels or where he hurts, can make a judgment only on the observable and measurable signs of abnormality. The admitting physician at Immanuel Medical Center noted and recorded that Chad was "irritable," that his "right tympanic membrane was red," and that his tonsils were red and somewhat swollen.

On the basis of these rudimentary findings, together with the information provided by the Sheltons, he recorded three tentative diagnoses: gastroenteritis, otitis media (inflammation of the middle ear), and tonsillitis. He also, as is usual in such ambiguous cases, sought the opinion of a consultant. The consulting physician's observations were entered on Chad Shelton's chart the following day. He observed that the patient was "somnolent through the evening, and this morning was noted to be poorly responsive." He noted what appeared to be multiple "bruises."

Preliminary laboratory tests were generally normal, with two striking exceptions. One showed abnormal liver function. The other was the blood-platelet count. Platelets are protoplasms intricately involved in the salvational coagulation of blood that normally follows trauma. A normal platelet count ranges from a hundred and fifty thousand to three hundred thousand and upward. Chad's platelet count was nineteen thousand. That would seem to explain the "bruises." They were hemorrhages.

The consultant noted his preliminary impression: "This may be a Reye's syndrome." Reye's syndrome, an entity of recent recognition, is a disease of still uncertain origin that largely afflicts young children and is characterized by vomiting, central-nervous-system damage, and liver damage. The production of platelets is a function of the bone marrow, and a low platelet count may reflect defective production or disordered distribution. The latter can be the result of a rush of platelets to a damaged organ—for example, the liver. The consultant recommended that more definitive tests be made and that the patient be transferred to the intensive-care unit of Children's Memorial Hospital.

Chad was admitted to Children's Hospital late that afternoon. He arrived there in a coma. It was noted that "within an hour after

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admission, the child's respiratory status began to deteriorate and it was necessary to place him on a ventilator . . . A repeat platelet count at 4:30 P.M. revealed a platelet count of 18,000 [and] support was begun with platelets and whole blood . . . During the evening and early-morning hours, bleeding problems became increasingly difficult to control. The child's condition continued to deteriorate, and he was pronounced dead at 4:30 A.M. the morning of September 14th."

An autopsy was performed. It revealed an "essentially complete necrosis of the child's hepatic [liver] cells, with very little fatty infiltration." The opinion of the pathologist was that "this pattern is more consistent with a toxic ingestion of an unknown agent rather than Reye's syndrome or other infectious etiologies." The final diagnosis reflected his opinion. It read, "1. Severe acute hepatic necrosis secondary to a toxic ingestion of an unknown agent. 2. Disseminated intravascular coagulation. 3. Cerebral hemorrhage secondary to #2. 4. Cerebral edema secondary to #1 and #2. 5. Terminal renal failure."

That was the beginning, but only the beginning. Shortly before noon that day—Thursday, September 14th, the day of Chad Shelton's death—a man named Duane N. Johnson, aged twenty-four and a trucker by trade, was admitted to Immanuel Medical Center by way of the emergency room. He was brought to the hospital by ambulance from the office of his family physician. He had collapsed in the waiting room there, and when he reached the hospital he was comatose.

His wife, Sandra Betten Johnson, accompanied him. She told the admitting physician that her husband had become ill on Sunday evening. He had had an attack of chills, then diarrhea, then vomiting. He vomited several times on Monday and again on Tuesday. Yesterday, Wednesday, he had a severe nosebleed. This morning, he felt even worse—he was still vomiting, his head ached, light hurt his eyes, he was exhausted—and he arranged to see their doctor.

Mrs. Johnson was frightened and confused. Her husband had never been sick a day in his life. Now he was lying there unconscious. And not only that—Sherrie, their three-year-old daughter, was also sick. Not as sick as Duane, but she had complained of stomach pains, and she had vomited several times. The last few days had been a nightmare. Mrs. Johnson didn't know what was happening. Her sister Sallie and her husband had also been sick this week—sick to

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their stomachs, like Sherrie. And only last night—early this morning—Chad, her sister's little baby, had died at Children's Hospital. They said he might have been poisoned.

The admitting physician pricked up his ears. Chad? Was her nephew named Shelton? That's right—Chad Shelton. Did the doctor know about him? The doctor said he did. He said it was he who had admitted him to the hospital here on Tuesday. The doctor stopped and reflected. He reminded himself that Chad had suffered multiple hemorrhages. And Johnson had had a nosebleed. He asked himself if there might be some connection here. And Mrs. Johnson had said that their daughter was sick. He asked Mrs. Johnson to bring her daughter around to the hospital, he thought he ought to take a careful look at her.

Johnson remained comatose. The results of the admitting physician's preliminary examination were both unrevealing and alarming. The pupil of Johnson's right eye was "dilated and fixed," he wrote in his report. "Left pupil was pinpoint. Evidence of some conjunctival hemorrhage bilaterally. There was some blood in the pharynx."

The physician again felt that a second opinion would be helpful. The consultant's findings, refined by a series of laboratory tests, fully justified the admitting physician's alarm. He noted on Johnson's chart, "There is no motor movement. There is no response to painful stimuli . . . He is on a respirator. He has had an intracranial hemorrhage . . . A CAT scan shows an intracerebral hematoma."

Johnson's platelet count was a mere six thousand. An S.G.O.T. test was performed. This is a test that determines the concentration in the blood of an enzyme whose excessive presence is indicative of liver damage. A normal S.G.O.T. count is from five to eighteen units. Johnson's count was nine hundred and ten. The consultant concluded his report, "The patient, I think, has essentially gone into . . . a neurological situation from which he cannot be retrieved."

Nevertheless, in the hope of retrieval, Johnson was transferred late that day to another hospital, Bishop Clarkson Memorial Hospital, where a technical procedure not available at Immanuel Medical Center could be performed. He was examined at Clarkson by a second consultant.

It is usual for a physician confronted by a hopeless or near-hopeless case to note on the patient's chart some easy euphemism like "The prognosis is guarded." Johnson's condition jolted the consultant at

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Clarkson into the open. He concluded his report, "The prognosis for this patient is horrible."

Meanwhile, as requested by the physician who had admitted her husband that morning, Sandra Johnson returned to Immanuel Medical Center with her daughter, Sherrie. Sherrie was still in pain, still vomiting. She was admitted there at around two o'clock in the afternoon. The preliminary physical examination revealed a scattering of small intradermal hemorrhages on her eyelids and on her lower legs. Her liver was found to be tender and somewhat enlarged. Her platelet count was thirteen thousand. Her S.G.O.T. was seven hundred and two. An exchange blood transfusion was ordered. Following that, in the late afternoon, Sherrie was moved to Children's Hospital and placed in the intensive-care unit there.

Mrs. Johnson saw Sherrie settled at Children's Hospital. There was nothing more that she could do. She then visited her comatose husband at Clarkson Memorial Hospital. There was nothing that she could do there, either. She went home. But at least she did not go home to an empty house. Her second sister, Susan Betten Conley, was then staying with the Johnsons.

The two distraught young women talked—about Duane, about Sherrie, about Chad. It was hard for them to believe that this was happening. Nothing in this terrible day seemed quite real. They later drove over to the Sheltons' house. The Sheltons were not as well recovered from their gastrointestinal troubles as they had tried to persuade themselves. Chad's pathetic illness and then his shattering death had distracted them from their own illness. Now they realized that they were far from well.

Sallie Shelton, especially, felt poorly. She had abdominal pain, diarrhea, and nausea. Shelton and the three sisters talked. It was suggested that maybe Sallie should be hospitalized. Susan and Sandra left. They felt even more bewildered after talking with their sister and brother-in-law. They couldn't understand why they themselves were not sick—why they alone of the two families, the two households, were well.

Sandra drove back to Children's Hospital. Sherrie was asleep, and her condition was described as stable. Sandra drove on to Clarkson Memorial. Her husband was still in a coma. There had been no improvement in his condition. He was almost certainly dying. She settled down to an all-night vigil.

Sallie Shelton spent a restless night. She awoke the next morn-

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ing—Friday, September 15th—feeling very definitely ill. As she and her husband were dressing, the telephone rang. It was Sandra Johnson. Duane was dead. He had died about an hour ago, without recovering any degree of consciousness. That decided the Sheltons. They drove to Clarkson Memorial Hospital. Mrs. Shelton was examined in the emergency room. Her son's death and its cryptic nature were remembered. She was admitted for observation and testing. Then, as a precaution, it was decided to also admit her husband.

The indicated tests revealed that Bruce Shelton's S.G.O.T. was mildly elevated (a hundred and twenty-five units) and his platelet count was a hundred and twenty-three thousand, or a little low. Sallie Shelton's condition was found to be more serious. She was still nauseated, still diarrhetic, she had a headache, she was running a fever, and she was noticeably lethargic. Her S.G.O.T. level was eighty-five, and although her initial platelet count was a hundred and sixteen thousand, only a little lower than her husband's, subsequent evaluations showed an ominous downward trend.

Later that day, with Mrs. Johnson's permission, an autopsy was performed on Duane Johnson. The immediate cause of death was found to have been a cerebral hemorrhage. The pathologist's report also noted an almost total lack of platelets and massive liver damage "of unknown etiology."

A memorandum dated September 18, 1978, from J. Lyle Conrad, director of the Field Services Division, Bureau of Epidemiology, Center for Disease Control, in Atlanta, reads:

> On September 15, 1978, Alan Kendal, Ph.D., Respiratory Virology Branch, Virology Division, Bureau of Laboratories, C.D.C., received a call from Paul A. Stoesz, M.D., State Epidemiologist, Nebraska, concerning two recent deaths in a group of families in Omaha, Nebraska . . . Dr. Stoesz related that 2 people, an 11-month-old child and a 30-year-old [*sic*] man, had died within the past 2 days of an illness characterized by vomiting and diarrhea. Clinical information on the child indicated a death from hepatic failure. No information was available on the cause of death in the man, although an autopsy was being performed . . . Both toxic and infectious etiologies are being considered as possible causes for these deaths.
>
> Dr. Stoesz, on behalf of Henry D. Smith, M.D., Director

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of Health, Nebraska State Department of Health, and Warren Jacobson, M.D., Director, Douglas County Health Department, invited C.D.C. to assist in an investigation of the situation . . . After further discussions about potential etiologies for the outbreak, Dr. Conrad then contacted John P. M. Lofgren, M.D., E.I.S. [Epidemic Intelligence Service] Officer in Jefferson City, Missouri . . . Dr. Lofgren departed for Omaha the evening of September 15.

"Yes," Dr. Lofgren says. "I got Dr. Conrad's call at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Omaha and Jefferson City are not that close together, but apparently I was the nearest E.I.S. officer to the scene. Anyway, I got the call and went home and packed and took off. I drove the rest of the day and part of the night. I got to Omaha—to a motel room that the doctors there had reserved for me—at about two A.M. There was a message waiting for me. There was to be a big meeting the next morning in the conference room at Clarkson Memorial Hospital, and one of the local doctors would pick me up. Which he did.

"At the meeting, there were about thirty people—the attending physicians, house officers, and medical students involved in the case, lab people and pathologists, hospital social workers, the staff of the county health department, and the state epidemiologist and his staff. We settled down to work in good order. We had the two autopsy reports and the charts on the three surviving patients. It was a strange case, and very wide open.

"But there were a few conclusions that we could be comfortable with. It seemed clear that we were dealing with a disease that was not epidemic, that was limited to just the Johnson and the Shelton families. Then we defined the disease. Our case definition required these symptoms: vomiting, an increased S.G.O.T., and a decrease in platelets.

"The state and county epidemiologists had made a good beginning. A setting had begun to take shape. The Johnson home seemed to be the site of the trouble. The outbreak had its origin there on the afternoon of Sunday, September 10th, sometime between three and four o'clock. The two families had not been together in about a week until then. But that afternoon the three Sheltons—Bruce, Sallie, and the baby, Chad—dropped in on the Johnsons and Susan Conley. They visited about an hour.

"At about three-fifteen, Sandra Johnson went to the refrigerator

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and took out a white plastic pitcher of lemonade. She added ice and filled some glasses. Bruce Shelton took a couple of swallows from his glass and then poured about three-quarters of an inch in a glass for little Chad, and Sallie Shelton finished off the rest. Sandra didn't like lemonade, and she drank none. Neither did her sister Susan. Duane Johnson and the little girl, Sherrie, both drank some of the lemonade. It was suggested that Duane might have drunk two glasses.

"The Sheltons left to make another call and then started home. On the way home, Bruce and Sallie began to feel sick to the stomach. A few minutes after they got home—at about six o'clock—Sallie vomited. That made her feel a little better. Then, at about seven o'clock, Bruce vomited, and then little Chad. Then Sallie vomited again, and she and her husband vomited again and again during the next four hours. But Chad vomited only once that night. The two Johnsons—Duane and his daughter, Sherrie—had much the same experience.

"The investigation had shown that Sandra Johnson had made the lemonade. She had made it a day or two before Sunday—maybe as early as the previous Thursday. But she had made it as she always did—a packaged mix with water and sugar. It was uncertain whether all the lemonade was drunk or whether some was left and thrown out. In any event, the pitcher was empty. The fatal lemonade was gone.

"I say 'fatal' because, as unlikely as lemonade sounds as a cause of poisoning, we were satisfied that the outbreak was an outbreak of poisoning, and that the lemonade was the vehicle. There had been some toxic material in it. The onset of illness was compatible with poisoning by some organic poison. The incubation period was all wrong for an infectious disease. Much too short.

"Later, after the meeting, I went out to the Johnson house and had a look around. It was a lower-middle-class house on low ground and in bad repair. The plumbing was poor. The house had already been carefully searched, and I was provided with samples of everything that could be even remotely connected with the trouble. One of these possibilities was some firecrackers. Firecrackers contain yellow phosphorus, and its taste could have been masked by the lemonade. There was no indication of how the phosphorus might have got into the lemonade.

"So that's where we stood. We had a clear clinical syndrome and a likely vehicle. But we didn't have any idea of what the toxic agent

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might have been. The answer, if we were going to get one, would seem to be up to the laboratory people.

"John Wiley, the Douglas County epidemiologist, was very helpful. We arranged for samples of everything found in the Johnson house that could be analyzed and sent them off to C.D.C. We also sent off blood and urine samples taken from all the patients, and frozen liver, brain, lung, kidney, and spleen specimens from Duane Johnson. That was about the end of my role in the investigation. I went back to Jefferson City and wrote up my report."

The samples gathered for Dr. Lofgren by Mr. Wiley and his staff were received at C.D.C.—at the Toxicology Branch of the Bureau of Laboratories—in three installments, on September 20th, 21st, and 25th. It was a comprehensive and a very considerable collection. It numbered thirty-four items, including a packet of twenty firecrackers.

Animal experiments were at once begun. A group of laboratory rats were fed (by gavage) various materials found in the Johnson kitchen—tap water, sugar, lemonade mix. Other rats were injected with material taken from the several patients. The plastic pitcher in which the lemonade had been made was treated with a citric-acid solution in the hope of extracting some minuscule remains of the lemonade, and the solution was fed to another group of rats. The firecrackers were anatomized. They were found to contain only an insignificant quantity of yellow phosphorus. The laboratory animals were sacrificed at intervals during the next week or so, and their kidneys, livers, and other organs and tissues were examined for eloquent pathological changes. None was found.

Liver tissue obtained from Johnson at autopsy was further analyzed for the presence of selenium—a substance that in large concentrations has a toxic affinity for the liver—and for arsenic. The results were essentially normal. Urine samples taken from Bruce and Sallie Shelton at the peak of their illness were analyzed for evidence of a dangerous herbicide called paraquat. The results again were negative.

The toxicological examination of the various samples and specimens relating to the Omaha outbreak was monitored and its results were evaluated by a research medical officer in the Toxicology Branch of C.D.C. named Renate D. Kimbrough. Dr. Kimbrough, a native of Germany and a graduate in medicine of the University of

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Göttingen, is the wife of a research chemist and the mother of three children. She is also a pathologist and a toxicologist of national distinction. She found the laboratory results, for all their negativity, both useful and interesting.

"One thing was particularly noteworthy," Dr. Kimbrough says. "The liver was the only affected organ. That eliminated a good many possible poisons. Most toxic chemicals that cause severe liver damage also cause damage to other parts of the body. As a matter of fact, it is unusual to find only liver damage—to find the liver destroyed and none of the other organs affected. There were also other limiting factors to consider. One was that the poison had to be something that was easily soluble in water—in lemonade. Another was that it had to be more or less tasteless and odorless. There was no indication that the Johnson lemonade had either a funny taste or a funny smell.

"Well, those factors eliminated a number of other compounds. In fact, they narrowed the field to a group of readily modifiable hydrocarbons called alkylating agents. This was not an area in which I felt very much at home, but I knew someone who did. I knew an expert. I put in a call to Ronald C. Shank. Dr. Shank is associate professor of toxicology in the Department of Community and Environmental Medicine at the University of California at Irvine. I told him my story and what I needed. Could he give me a list of water-soluble alkylating agents?

"No problem. He gave me a list of eight—methyl methane sulfonate; dimethyl sulfate; dimethylnitrosamine; N-methyl-N'-nitro-N-nitrosoguanidine; 1, 2 dimethylhydrazine; methyl chloride; methyl bromide; and methyl iodide. Then I went to work.

"It was another process of evaluation and elimination. I ruled out methyl chloride, methyl bromide, and methyl iodide almost at once. They are all weak alkylating agents, and they are lethal only in very large amounts—amounts too large to go undetected in a glass of lemonade. Moreover, the initial impact of those agents is on the brain, so the initial effect is mental confusion. That had not been noted in any of the Omaha cases.

"I could also rule out 1, 2 dimethylhydrazine. It causes severe damage to the red blood cells, and no such damage was noted in any of the Omaha reports. Then I eliminated methyl methane sulfonate. The kind of liver damage it produces is quite different from that observed in Duane Johnson and Chad Shelton. The same was true of dimethyl sulfate and N-methyl-N'-nitro-N-nitrosoguanidine. And

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the latter, again, is lethal only in very large amounts. That left dimethylnitrosamine.

"I think I knew almost at once that dimethylnitrosamine was the answer. It perfectly met all the required criteria. It is a liquid, and it is well miscible with water. It is largely odorless and tasteless. It is extremely toxic in very small amounts. The lethal dose for a medium-sized adult is less than two grams, and for a small child about one-third of a gram. A third of a gram is about seven drops, or less than half a teaspoonful. And dimethylnitrosamine is peculiarly liver-specific. It attacks the liver and only the liver, and the lesions it causes are quite distinctive. I studied the textbook lesions caused by dimethylnitrosamine. Then I examined under the microscope the liver specimens taken at autopsy from Duane Johnson and Chad Shelton. The Johnson and Shelton lesions were identical with the textbook examples.

"Now, let me move ahead for a moment. I was satisfied that the poison involved was dimethylnitrosamine, but I wanted to be more than that. I wanted to be absolutely sure. This was not an accidental poisoning. Everyone involved in the matter was certain that the poison had been deliberately added to the lemonade. It was a case of murder.

"Well, I called Dr. Shank again. Dimethylnitrosamine is very rapidly metabolized and excreted—within a couple of days of ingestion. So there was no possibility of turning up any trace of it in the liver samples. Its presence in the liver, however, causes certain chemical changes that can be measured by a high-pressure liquid-chromatography procedure that was recently developed by Dr. Shank. I asked him if he would perform his test on a group of liver tissues. This was to be, of course, a blind test.

"I supplied Dr. Shank with eight coded vials of material. They consisted of liver tissue taken from Duane Johnson, kidney tissue taken from him, and six liver and kidney specimens taken from cases in our storage file—three of them from alleged cases of methyl-bromide poisoning and three from cases of Reye's syndrome. Dr. Shank reported that one specimen of the eight was positive for dimethylnitrosamine. That was the coded sample of liver tissue taken from Duane Johnson. And that was definitive.

"But all this, as I say, came later. Much later—in August of 1979. So now let's go back to where we were—to October of 1978. I was reasonably satisfied that dimethylnitrosamine was the poison involved, and I acted on that assumption. The next question was: How

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did it get in the lemonade? And where did it come from? It certainly didn't come from the corner drugstore. Dimethylnitrosamine is not an everyday compound, and its uses are rather limited. It was originally developed in England, as a solvent for use in the automobile industry, and it may have some other highly specialized industrial uses, but it is also known to be a powerful carcinogen. That quality has given it a certain vogue in cancer research. It is widely used to induce cancer in laboratory animals. I thought about that, and I thought about Omaha. Omaha is not a great industrial center; it is a great insurance center. And it is something of a medical center. It has Creighton University School of Medicine and the University of Nebraska Medical School, and it has the Eppley Institute—the Eppley Institute for cancer research.

"I had talked with John Wiley, the Douglas County epidemiologist, a time or two in the course of the investigation. So now I called him again. I told him what I had in mind. I don't believe I actually singled out dimethylnitrosamine. I think I simply said that I was convinced that the poison involved was an alkylating agent, and that it might very well be one used in cancer research. I suggested that it might be a good idea to check and see if anybody connected with the Johnson or Shelton families had any connection with the Eppley Institute.

"He said he would. And he did. And there was a connection—a very direct, a very real connection."

The criminal investigation of the deaths of Chad Shelton and Duane Johnson was directed by Samuel W. Cooper, the Deputy Douglas County Attorney, together with Lieutenant Foster Burchard, of the Homicide Division of the Omaha Police Department. Much of the field work, and most of the most productive work, was done by a detective in Lieutenant Burchard's command named Kenneth G. Miller.

"It was a strange case," Cooper says. "Our investigation was the third phase of three quite distinct phases. There was first the medical investigation, then Renate Kimbrough's toxicological investigation, and then our homicide investigation. And even our phase was unusual. It was never, from our point of view, a simple case of whodunit. By the time we came into the picture, it had been established that the murder weapon was a toxic substance. So it was more a case of how-he-dunit.

"It took us a good long time to build up a provable case, but we

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had both the who and the how, and even the why, in only a matter of days. That was where Ken Miller came in.

"Miller had been working closely with John Wiley at the Health Department, and Wiley told him about his conversation with Dr. Kimbrough and her suggestion about a possible link between the families involved and the Eppley Institute. Miller was smart enough to take her suggestion seriously. He went back to his office and ran the Johnsons and the Sheltons through the computer file we have on victims of some sort of criminal act. And almost at once he found a lead. It involved the Johnsons—Duane and Sandra—and Sandra's mother and brother.

"One night in June of 1975, Duane and Sandra—they weren't the Johnsons yet, they were only going together—and her mother and brother went to the movies. Afterward, they were standing together out in front of the Bretten house, talking, when a car drove up and a man jumped out and opened fire with a shotgun. One of the pellets hit Sandra's mother and Sandra's brother was nicked a couple of times, but neither was really hurt. The man drove off, but there was no big mystery about the attack. The man had been a high-school sweetheart of Sandra's. He was jealous and crazed, furious that she had dropped him for another man, and his intended victim may have been Duane Johnson.

"His name was Steven Roy Harper, and he was a rather familiar type. Good student, quiet, never drank, smoked, or used drugs. The records showed that Harper was arrested, pleaded no contest to a charge of shooting with intent to kill, and was sentenced to one to five years in prison.

"That was on December 6, 1976. He was paroled on November 16, 1977. Ken Miller absorbed all that and then moved on to the Eppley Institute. It was almost too much. Harper had worked at the Eppley Institute. He had found a job there a few months after his release, and his job was one that put him in the vicinity of various chemical compounds, including alkylating agents, including dimethylnitrosamine. He had held the job for about five months, until August 18, 1978, when he resigned to take a better-paying job as a construction worker.

"That was the bare bones of our investigation. There was, of course, a great deal more—a lot of legwork, a lot of interviewing of Sandra Johnson and others, a lot of detail. Harper had been in Omaha at the time of the lemonade party, but now he was on a construction job in Beaumont, Texas. Miller and a couple of other

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detectives and I flew down to Beaumont with a warrant. We arranged for the F.B.I. to pick Harper up, and we took him into custody."

That was on Friday, October 13th, less than a month after the deaths of Chad Shelton and Duane Johnson. After his arrest, Harper made an informal declaration to a homicide detective in Cooper's entourage named Greg Thompson. Thompson's transcript of it reads, in its essentials:

> Harper states that he is still in love with Sandra Johnson, that his life has been miserable for the past four years, and everything built up in him until it came to this point. While working in the Gene Eppley Cancer Care Center [*sic*], he took a chemical which he called DMNA, a carcinogen . . .
>
> Harper stated that he remembers driving up by the Johnson house, looking and seeing that no one was there, drove past it, and parked down the street, around the corner. Harper then got out and walked back up the street, around the corner to the Johnson house, walked all the way around the Johnson house, looking for a way to get in. Harper states that he thought he went in the side door, but he may have went in the window, he can't really remember. Or maybe he just left by the side door. He remembers going into the house, opening up the refrigerator, taking the small vial, which he described to be between two (2) and three (3) inches long and maybe a half inch (½) diameter, pouring it into the lemonade in the refrigerator . . . Harper then left the residence.

Harper denied in his statement to Thompson that he had poisoned the lemonade with murderous intent. He told Thompson that "he didn't believe that it [the dimethylnitrosamine] was toxic, that it would only cause cancer." If such was his intention, he may have been not entirely unsuccessful. Of the three surviving victims of his poisoned lemonade, Bruce and Sallie Shelton were discharged from the hospital as fully recovered—he after four days of treatment, she after a stay of sixteen days. Sandra Johnson's daughter, Sherrie, was less fortunate. She was hospitalized for three weeks and then was followed for several months as an outpatient. The most recent record of her condition noted "continuous hepatosplenomegaly [enlargement of the liver and spleen] and elevated liver enzymes, and a liver biopsy obtained three months after exposure showed chronic

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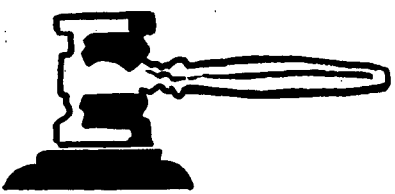
active hepatitis." A liver so damaged is often eventually hospitable to the development of cancer.

Harper was returned to Omaha. His case was presented at a preliminary judicial hearing, after which the presiding judge charged him with two counts of murder in the first degree and three counts of poisoning. On October 5, 1979, after a three-week trial in which Cooper served as prosecuting attorney and Dr. Kimbrough appeared as a key witness for the state, Harper was found guilty on all five counts and sentenced to die in the electric chair.



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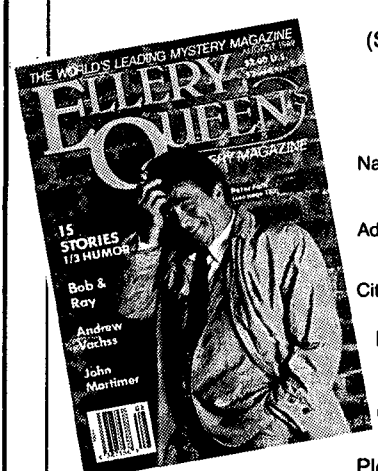

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PHONE CALL

by BERTON ROUECHÉ

I got out of the truck and got down on my knees and twisted my neck and looked underneath. Everything looked okay. There wasn't anything hanging down or anything. I got up and opened the hood and looked at the engine. I don't know too much about engines—only what I picked up working around Lindy's Service Station the summer before last. But the engine looked okay, too. I slammed down the hood and lit a cigarette. It really had me beat. A school bus from that convent over in Sag Harbor came piling around the bend, and all the girls leaned out the windows and yelled.

I just waved. They didn't mean anything by it—just a bunch of kids going home. The bus went on up the road and into the woods, out of sight. I got back in the truck and started it up again. It sounded fine. I put it in gear and let out the clutch and gave it the gas, and nothing happened. The bastard just sat there. So it was probably the transmission. I shut it off and got out.

There was nothing to do but call the store. I still had three or four deliveries that had to be made and it was getting kind of late. I knew what Mr. Lester would say, but this was one time when he couldn't blame me. It wasn't my fault. It was him himself that told me to take this truck.

There was a house just up the road—a big white house at the edge of the woods, with a white Rambler station wagon standing in the drive. I dropped my cigarette in a pothole puddle and started up the road, and stopped. A dog was lying there in the grass beside the station wagon. It put up its head and it was one of those German police dogs. I turned around and headed the other way. There was another house back there around the bend—I remembered passing it.

I went by the truck and walked down the road and around the bend, and the house was there. It was a brown shingle house with red shutters, and there was a sign in one of the windows: PIANO LESSONS. The name on the mailbox was Timothy. I couldn't tell if there was anybody home or not. There wasn't any car around, but

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there was a garage at the end of the drive and it could be parked in there. I went up the drive and around to the kitchen door. When I got close, I could hear a radio talking and laughing inside. I knocked on the door.

The radio went off. Then the door opened a crack and a woman looked out. She had bright blonde hair and little black eyes. She was forty years old at least. "Yes?" she said.

"Mrs. Timothy?" I said. "I work for the market over in Bridgehampton, Mrs. Timothy, and my truck—"

"How do you know my name?" she said.

"What? Why—it's on the mailbox. I just read it on the mailbox."

"Oh," she said. She licked her lips. "And you say you work for a market?"

"That's right. The market over in Bridgehampton. And my truck's broke down. So I wondered—"

"What market?" she said.

"Lester's Market. You know—over in Bridgehampton?"

"I see," she said.

"That's right," I said. "And my truck's broke down. I wondered could I use your phone to call the store and tell them?"

"Well," she said. She looked at me for about a minute. Then she stepped back and opened the door. She had on a pink sweater and one of those big wide skirts with big wide pockets, and she was nothing but skin and bones. "The telephone's in the living room. I'll show you."

I followed her through the kitchen and across a hall into the living room. I guess that was where she gave her music lessons. There was a piano there against the wall and a music stand and a couple of folding chairs, and on top of the piano was a clarinet and one of those metronomes and a big pile of sheet music. The telephone was on a desk between the windows.

"I don't suppose you need the book?" Mrs. Timothy said.

"What?" I said.

"The telephone book. You know the number of your store, I hope?"

"Oh, sure," I said.

"Very well." She reached up and straightened the PIANO LESSONS sign in the window. "Then go ahead and make your—"

She turned around, and she had the funniest look on her face. I mean, it was real strange. It was like she was scared or something.

"I thought you said you had a truck," she said. "I don't see any truck out there."

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"My truck?" I said. "Oh, it's up around the bend. That's where it broke down. You can't see it from here."

"I see," she said, and looked at me. She still had that funny look on her face. Even her voice sounded funny. "I'm here alone, but I want you to know something," she said. "I don't live alone. I'm married. I've got a husband and he'll be home any minute. He gets off work early today." She came away from the window. "So my advice to you is to make your call just as quickly as you can."

"Okay," I said, but I didn't get it. I watched her go across the room and through the hall to the kitchen. I didn't get it at all. She acted almost like I'd done something. I heard a car on the road and looked out. I thought maybe it might be her husband, but it was only some guys in a beat-up '59 Impala. But so what if it was her husband? I mean, she really had me going. I turned back to the desk and picked up the receiver. A woman's voice said, "But of course I never let on. I simply—"

I put down the receiver, lit a cigarette, and wandered down the room. I stopped at the piano and looked at the pile of sheet music. They were none of them songs I ever heard of. I looked around for an ashtray and I found a big white clamshell. It looked like they used it for that. It was on a little table next to an easy chair. Then I went back and tried the phone again.

The woman was still talking. I listened for a moment, but it sounded like she was still going strong. I was beginning to get kind of worried. I looked at my watch. It was already almost four o'clock. I went over to the clamshell and punched out my cigarette, but I guess I was in too big of a hurry. I punched too hard or something and the clamshell flipped off the table. I made a grab, but I only touched it and it skidded across the rug. I squatted down and picked it up, and, thank God, it wasn't broken. I must have broke its fall. It wasn't even cracked.

I heard Mrs. Timothy coming. The cigarette butt had rolled under the chair, and I brushed the ashes after it. Mrs. Timothy came through the door and stopped. Her mouth fell open.

"It's okay," I said. "It didn't even—"

"What were you doing in that table drawer?" she said.

"What?"

"I said what were you doing in that table drawer?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. What drawer? I mean, I wasn't doing anything in any drawer. I just accidentally dropped this ashtray. I dropped it and I was picking it up."

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Mrs. Timothy didn't say anything. She just stood there and looked at me. Then she cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "Did you make your call?"

"Not yet," I said. "The line was busy."

"Oh?" she said. "And how do you know that? I didn't hear you dial or even say a word."

"I don't mean the store," I said. "I mean the party line. It was your line was busy."

She gave me one of those looks. Something sure was eating her. She walked over to the desk and picked up the phone and listened. Then she held it out. I could hear the buzz of the empty line. She put down the phone. "I suppose they just this minute hung up," she said. "Is that what I'm supposed to believe?"

"There was somebody talking before," I said. "I tried it twice."

"I don't know what you have in mind, but I advise you to forget it," she said. "I'm not that easily fooled. I'm really not as stupid as you seem to think. I know what's going on these days. I read the papers, you know. I hear the news, and I've heard about boys like you. I know all about them. I didn't want to let you in. I only did it against my better judgment. I had a feeling about you the minute I opened the door."

She stood back against the desk. "I don't believe you had a breakdown. I don't believe it for a minute. If you broke down where you say you did, you were practically in front of the Millers', so that's where you would have gone to phone. You wouldn't have come all the way down here. I don't think you even *have* a truck. I think you came through the woods." She took a deep breath. "And now I want you to leave. I want you to get out of my house."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Timothy," I said. "I just want to call the store. I've *got* to call the store."

"I said get out of my house."

"Okay," I said. "Okay, but—"

"I said get out!" She reached in one of the pockets of her big skirt and brought out a knife. It was a kitchen knife, with a long blade honed down thin. She pointed it at me like a gun.

"Hey!" I said.

"Oh, I see," she said. "That changes things. It's a different story now, isn't it? You didn't know I could take care of myself, did you? That never occurred to you." She came away from the desk. "You thought I was just another helpless woman, didn't you?"

I stepped back a couple of steps. "Hey," I said. "Wait a minute."

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"What's the matter? You're not afraid of me, are you?" She moved the knife. "A big strong tough boy like you?"

I stepped back again. "Hey," I said. "For God's sake, what do you—"

"You *are* a big strong tough boy," she said. "Aren't you?"

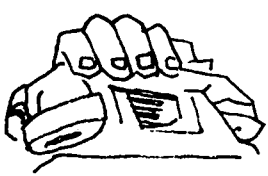
"For God's sake, Mrs. Timothy," I said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I wasn't doing anything."

She kind of smiled. "A great big strong tough boy," she said.

I didn't say anything. The way she was looking at me, I couldn't hardly think, I couldn't hardly even believe it. It was like it was all a dream. I took another step, and stumbled into one of the folding chairs. Then I was up against the piano. I looked at that knife coming at me and my heart began to jump. She meant it. She really meant it. But that didn't mean I had to just stand there and let her. I slid along the front of the piano and reached up and touched the metronome and pushed it away and stretched and found the clarinet and grabbed it.

She let out a kind of yell. "Don't you dare!" she said. "You put that down!" She raised the knife. "Put that clarinet down!"

But I had a good grip on it now. I looked at that knife with the point coming at me and swung. I swung at it as hard as I could. I felt it connect, it tingled all the way up my arm. The knife went sailing across the room and I heard it hit the wall. Mrs. Timothy didn't move. She just stood there, and she was holding her wrist. It wasn't bleeding or anything, but it looked kind of funny and loose. Then she began to scream.



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a *NEW* short story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"Mr. Koenig, how do you justify your existence?" Trumbull asked.

The Black Widowers' guest smiled broadly. "In view of Mr. Rubin's problems with the invention of alibis, I suppose I can most easily justify my existence by pointing out that in my time I have been a breaker of alibis."

Black Widowers story #59 from the amazing Isaac Asimov, who with Janet Asimov—psychiatrist, writer, and wife of the good doctor—recently published How To Enjoy Writing: A Book of Aid and Comfort *(Walker)* . . .

THE ALIBI

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Emmanuel Rubin was in an uncharacteristically mild mood during the cocktail hour preceding the Black Widowers' banquet. And uncharacteristically thoughtful, too. But characteristically didactic.

He was saying to Geoffrey Avalon (though his voice was loud enough to reach all corners of the room), "I don't know how many mystery stories—or suspense stories, as they tend to call them these days—have been written, but the number is approaching the astronomical and I certainly haven't read them all.

"Of course, the old-fashioned puzzle story is passe, though I like to write one now and then, but even the modern psychological story, in which the crime is merely mentioned in passing but the inner workings of the criminal's tortured soul occupies thousands of tortured words, may have its puzzle aspects.

"What it amounts to is that I'm trying to think up a new kind of alibi that is broken in a new kind of way, and I wonder—what are

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the odds of my thinking one up that has never been used before? And no matter how ingenious I am, how can I possibly know that someone long ago, in some obscure volume I never read, didn't use precisely the same bit of ingenuity? I envy the early practitioners in the field. Almost anything they made up had never been used before."

Avalon said, "What are the odds, Manny? If *you* haven't read all the suspense stories written, neither has any reader. Just make up something. If it's a repeat of some obscure device that appeared in a novel published fifty-two years ago, who will know?"

Rubin said bitterly, "Somewhere someone will have read that early novel and he'll write to me, very likely sarcastically."

Mario Gonzalo, from the other end of the room, called out, "In your case, it won't matter, Manny—there are so many other things to criticize in your stories that probably no one will bother pointing out that your gimmicks are old hat!"

"There speaks a man," said Rubin, "who in a lifetime of portraiture has produced only caricature."

"Caricature is a difficult art," said Gonzalo, "as you would know if you knew anything about art."

Gonzalo was sketching the evening's guest in order that the sketch might be added to those that marched along the wall of the room at the Milano Restaurant in which the banquets took place.

He had what seemed an easy task this time, for the guest brought in by Avalon, who was host of the evening, had a magnificent mane of white hair, thick and lightly waved, shining like spun silver in the lamplight. His regular features and spontaneous, even-toothed smile made it quite certain that he was one of those men who grew statelier and more handsome with age. His name was Leonard Koenig and Avalon had introduced him merely as "my friend."

Koenig said, "You're making me look something like a superannuated movie star, Mr. Gonzalo."

"You can't fool an artist's eye, Mr. Koenig," said Gonzalo. "Are you one, by any chance?"

"No," said Koenig, without further elaboration, and Rubin laughed.

"Mario's right, Mr. Koenig," said Rubin, "you can't fool an *artist's* eye."

With that the conversation grew more general, breaking off temporarily only when the soft voice of that peerless waiter, Henry, announced, "Please take your seats, gentlemen. Dinner is being served." —And they sat down to their turtle soup, which Roger

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Halsted, as the club gourmet, sipped carefully before giving it the benediction of a broad smile.

Over the brandy, Thomas Trumbull, whose crisply waved white hair lost caste, somehow, against the brighter, softer hair of the guest, took up the task of grilling.

"Mr. Koenig, how do you justify your existence?" he asked.

Koenig smiled broadly. "In view of Mr. Rubin's problems with the invention of alibis, I suppose I can most easily justify my existence by pointing out that in my time I have been a breaker of alibis."

"Your profession has not been announced by Jeff," said Trumbull. "May I take it, then, that you're on the police force?"

"Not quite. Not on an ordinary police force. I am in counter-espionage—or, to put it more accurately, I was. I retired early and moved into the law, which is how I met Jeff Avalon."

Trumbull's eyebrows shot up. "Counterespionage?"

Koenig smiled again. "I read your mind, Mr. Trumbull. I know of your position with the government and you're wondering why you don't know my name. I assure you I was a minor cog, who, except for one case, never did anything notable. Besides, as you know, it's not department policy to publicize its members. We do our work best in obscurity. And, as I said, I retired early. And have been forgotten, in any case."

Gonzalo said eagerly, "That alibi you broke. How did you do that?"

"It's a long story," said Koenig, "and not something I should talk about in detail."

"You can trust us," said Gonzalo. "Nothing that's said at any Black Widowers' meeting is ever mentioned outside. That includes our waiter, Henry, who's himself a member of the club. Tom, tell him."

"Well, it's true," said Trumbull reluctantly. "We're all souls of discretion. Even so, though, I can't urge you to talk about matters that shouldn't be talked of."

Avalon pursed his lips judiciously. "I'm not sure we can take that attitude, Tom. The condition of the banquet is that the guest must answer all questions and rely on our discretion."

Gonzalo said, "Look, Mr. Koenig, you can leave out anything you think is too sensitive to talk about. Just describe the alibi and don't tell us how you broke it—*we'll* break it for you."

James Drake chuckled. "Don't make rash promises, Mario."

"We can try," said Gonzalo.

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Koenig said thoughtfully, "Do you mean you want to make a game of this?"

"Why not?" said Gonzalo. "Tom Trumbull can disqualify himself if it turns out he remembers the case."

"I doubt that he will. The whole thing was on a 'need to know' basis and he wasn't part of the same organization I was." Koenig paused to think for a moment. "I suppose it's possible to play the game, but it was almost thirty years ago. I hope I remember all the details." He cleared his throat and began.

"It's interesting," said Koenig, "that Mr. Rubin mentioned the tales that talk about the psychology of the criminal, because in my old business a lot depended on the psychology of the spy. There were people who betrayed their country for money, or for spite, or out of sexual infatuation. These are easy to handle, in a way, because they have no strong underpinning of conviction and, if caught, give way easily."

"Greed is the thing," said Halsted feelingly. "And you don't have to be a spy. The corrupt politician, the tax-finagling businessman, the industrialist who defrauds the armed forces with overcharges and shoddy work can damage the country as badly as any spy."

"Yes," said Rubin, "but these guys will shout patriotism all over the place. They can steal the government and the people blind, but as long as they hang out the flag on Memorial Day and vilify foreigners and anyone to the left of Genghis Khan they're great guys."

"That's why," said Avalon, "Samuel Johnson pointed out that patriotism was the last refuge of the scoundrel."

"Undoubtedly," said Koenig, "but we're veering from the point. I was going to say that there are also spies who do their job out of a strong ideological feeling. They may do so out of admiration for the ideals of another nation, or because they feel they are serving the cause of world peace, or in some other way are behaving nobly in their own eyes. We can't really complain about this—we have people in foreign countries who work for us for similar idealistic reasons, and, in fact, we have more of these than our enemies have. In any case, these ideologues are the really dangerous spies, for they plan more carefully, are willing to take greater risks, and are far more resolute when caught. A man of that sort was Stephen. Notice that I'm using only his first name, and Stephen was not the true first name, either.

"Stephen lived a quiet life—he didn't draw attention to himself.

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He didn't make the mistake of trying to cover his true purposes by an unrealistic profession of patriotism. It's just that he had available to him, in the way of his work and of circumstances, a great many items we didn't want the enemy to have. Still, there are many people who know matters that had best be confidential, and the vast majority of them are thoroughly dependable, and there was no reason to suppose that Stephen wasn't as dependable as any of them.

"However, there were certain data that the enemy would particularly want to have—data to which Stephen had access. He could easily pass it along to the enemy. If he did, though, circumstances were such that he would surely be suspected. In fact, there would be what would amount to a moral certainty that he was the culprit. Yet such was the importance of the information that he *had* to obtain it.

"Notice, by the way, that I don't tell you anything at all about the nature of the data in question—about the manner in which he had access or the manner in which he would make the transfer. All that is irrelevant to the little game we are playing. Now let me try to put myself into Stephen's mind—

"He knew he had to perform the task, and he knew he would instantly be suspected, strongly suspected. He felt that he had to protect himself somehow. It wasn't so much that he feared imprisonment, for he might be exchanged. Nor, I imagine, did he fear death, since the circumstances of his life were such that he must have known that he lived with the possibility of death, even unpleasant death, every day.

"Nevertheless, as a patriot—I suppose he could be considered that if viewed through his own eyes—he didn't want to be caught because he knew he couldn't easily be replaced. Furthermore, if he could somehow be absolved of suspicion, our department would have to look elsewhere. That would waste our energies and place any number of innocent people under suspicion, all of which would work to our disadvantage.

"But how could he avoid being caught when he was, of necessity, the obvious culprit? Clearly, he would have to be in two places—in the city, where he could carry through his task, and, at the same time, in a faraway place so that it would seem he could not possibly have had anything to do with the task—the only way he could achieve that was to be two people.

"Here is the way he managed it, as we eventually found out. The country Stephen worked for provided a lookalike, whom we might

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call Stephen Two. I imagine that if Stephen and Stephen Two stood next to each other it would be easy to distinguish between them, but if someone saw Stephen Two and then, a few days later, Stephen himself, it would seem that he had seen the same person.

"It also seems logical to suppose that Stephen Two's resemblance to Stephen was reinforced. He would be given Stephen's hair-styling, would cultivate Stephen's thin moustache, would practice Stephen's voice as given on recordings and his signature as recorded on documents. He would even have learned to make use of some of Stephen's favorite expressions. Naturally, he would have to be someone who spoke English and understood the culture as well as Stephen did.

"All this must have taken considerable time and effort, but it's a measure of the importance of what the enemy country was after that the time and effort was spent.

"We eventually pieced together what it was that Stephen did and are satisfied that the account is essentially correct.

"As the time approached, Stephen let it be known, in as casual a manner as seemed appropriate, that he would be going to Bermuda for a week's vacation by way of a cruise ship. When the time came, he went into hiding and changed his appearance slightly so that he wouldn't readily be recognized while he carried out the theft and transmission of the data as quietly and as obscurely as possible.

"It was Stephen Two, of course, who took the ship to Bermuda. Stephen himself, as it happened, had never been to Bermuda, and that struck him as a useful fact. Having been there but once would account for the fact that he might not know all there was to know about the island. He had, however, to know what he himself had done on the island, and for that purpose he had Stephen Two send him, by way of a simple code and a secure accommodation-address, a condensed but detailed account of what he did and saw in Bermuda. In particular, Stephen Two must do a number of unimportant things that he would have to recount in detail so that Stephen could use them as proof of having been in Bermuda. A casual reference to the unimportant could be made to seem convincing evidence.

"We're quite certain that Stephen ordered Stephen Two to make friends with some reasonably attractive woman on the ship and get along with her well enough so that she would be certain to remember him—yet not so well that she could detect some difference between the two Stephens. In particular, he didn't want Stephen Two to get intimate and start a romance. I imagine that he didn't want to be

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handed a situation that might make him uncomfortable, and a woman who imagined they had been lovers, when that was something he wouldn't be able to deny without great danger to himself, would certainly represent something uncomfortable.

"The week during which Stephen Two was in Bermuda must have been a period of great suspense for Stephen. He carried through his own task, but what if the cruise ship foundered or Stephen Two had an accident and was hospitalized, crippled, or even killed? Or suppose Stephen Two were fingerprinted for some reason, or turned traitor? Anything like that would have ruined Stephen's alibi and made his jailing certain.

"In actual fact, of course, none of these things took place. Stephen Two sent his letters faithfully, numbering each so that Stephen could be certain that none had been lost. Stephen carefully memorized each letter as well as he might.

"Eventually, Stephen Two returned from Bermuda and with quiet skill faded out and went back to his own country, while Stephen resumed his identity.

"It was two weeks after the end of the Bermuda trip that we had reason to suspect that the data Stephen had been after had been tampered with. A quick investigation proved the case, and the finger of suspicion pointed forcefully and without question at Stephen.

"A group of us descended upon him.

"He was quite admirable in his way. His distress at the loss of the information seemed quite sincere and he admitted ruefully that he was the logical suspect and, indeed, the only one.

" 'But,' he said, 'I was on *The Island Duchess* from the ninth to the sixteenth, and I was in Bermuda between the eleventh and the fourteenth. If the loss took place during that period, I simply couldn't have done it.'

"He gave us full details and, of course, had ample records to the effect that he had bought tickets, embarked, disembarked, paid his bar bill and some other expenses, and so on. All seemed in order. It didn't even seem suspicious that he could produce this all on demand. He said, 'I'm going to claim part of this as business expense, so I'll need records for the I.R.S.'

"There seemed to be a disposition among my confreres to accept this and to wonder if there might be other suspects, after all. I held off. Stephen seemed, for some reason, to be too smooth to me, and I insisted on continuing to question him while others tackled other angles of the case. That was my big achievement as a spy catcher.

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If I'd had one or two more like that, the department might not have been so willing to let me go when I asked for retirement, but I didn't. This was my one and only.

"In a second interview, I said to him, 'Were you on the ship or in Bermuda every moment from embarkation to disembarkation?'

" 'Yes, of course," he said, 'I was at the mercy of the ship.'

" 'Not entirely, sir,' I told him.

"He frowned, as though trying to penetrate my meaning, then said, 'Do you mean that I might have flown from the ship to here and then back to the ship, and in that way have been here for the job and there for an alibi?'

" 'Something like that,' I said grimly.

" 'I couldn't get on a plane without identifying myself,' he protested.

" 'There is such a thing as deliberate misidentification.'

" 'I understand that,' he said, 'but I suppose you can check as to whether any helicopter encountered the ship at any time. I suppose you can check every passenger on every plane between here and Bermuda between the eleventh and the fourteenth and see whether any passenger is unaccounted for or anything but a real person distinct from myself.'

"I didn't bother to tell him that such checks were actually under way.

"Our interviews were recorded, of course, with Stephen's permission. We had read him his rights, but he said he was perfectly willing to talk and required no lawyer. He was the very model of an innocent citizen confident in his innocence, and that simply raised my suspicions somehow. He seemed too good to be true, and too confident. It was about then that I began to wonder if he had a twin brother, so that he could seem to be in Bermuda even while he was at home. That was checked out, too, and it was established he was a single birth and an only son. But the idea of a lookalike remained in my mind.

"I said, in a later interview, 'Did you stay on the ship while in Bermuda or at a hotel?'

" 'On the ship.'

" 'Had you ever been to Bermuda before? Are you a well known figure there in any way?'

" 'It was my first trip to Bermuda.'

" 'Is there anyone who can vouch for your presence on the ship

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each day? Anyone who can vouch that you were in Bermuda at those times you were off the ship?'

"He hesitated. 'I was on the cruise alone. I didn't go with any friends. After all, I had no idea, no faintest notion that I'd have to prove I was on the ship.'

"I half smiled. That seemed a hair too ingenuous. 'You're not going to tell me,' I said, 'that you were a recluse, skulking in corners and speaking to no one.'

" 'No,' he said, looking a little uncomfortable. 'As a matter of fact, I was friendly enough, but I can't guarantee that any of the people I interacted with casually would remember me. Except—'

" 'Go on. What is the exception?'

" 'There was a young woman I grew friendly with at the start of the cruise. She became my steady companion at ship's meals, and for much of the time in Bermuda. There was nothing intimate about the relationship. I'm not a married man, but even so it was just a casual friendship. I think she might remember me. We danced on board ship, and in Bermuda we visited the aquarium, went on the glass-bottom boat together, took tours, ate at the Princess Hotel. She went to the beach alone, though. I tend to avoid the sun.'

" 'Did you see her every day?'

"He thought a moment. 'Yes, every day. Not all day, and not at night. She was never in my room and I was never in hers.'

" 'What was the young woman's name?'

" 'Artemis.'

" 'Artemis?' I said, rather in disbelief.

" 'That's what she told me her name was, and that's what I heard others call her. She was a very pretty woman—in her early thirties, I should judge, with dark-blonde hair and blue eyes. About five feet six in height.'

" 'And her last name?'

"He hesitated. 'I don't remember. She may not even have mentioned it. It was shipboard, you know—very informal. She called me Stephen. I don't think I ever mentioned my own last name.'

" 'Her address?'

" 'I don't know. She spoke as though she were a New Yorker, but I don't know. You can always look at the ship's records for the week. She'd be listed, and I'd say the chances are virtually zero that there would be two Artemises. They'd surely have her last name and her home address.'

"I turned off the recording device at that and warned him that,

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as had been established, he'd continue to be confined to his apartment for the duration of the questioning, but that anything necessary would be brought to him, and any reasonable errands would be run for him.

"I was determined to prove if I could that whoever had been in Bermuda, it wasn't Stephen—but for that I would clearly need the woman.

"It took three days to find her, and each day was an annoyance. Obviously I couldn't keep Stephen under wraps indefinitely, and once he began to complain loudly enough we'd have to come up with something definite or let him go.

"But he didn't complain. He continued to be a model citizen, and once I had Artemis in tow I arranged to have her see him when he didn't know she was looking at him. She said, 'It certainly looks like Stephen.'

" 'Let's meet him, then,' I said. 'Just act naturally, but please keep your eyes open and let me know if, for any reason, you think it's not the man you met on the ship.'

"I brought her into the room and Stephen looked at her, smiled, and said, 'Hello, Artemis.'

"She said, a little hesitantly, 'Hello, Stephen.'

"She was no actress. She looked at him anxiously, and Stephen would have had to be far less intelligent than he clearly was not to guess that, under instructions, she was trying to tell whether he might not be an imposter.

"Finally she said, 'He certainly looks like Stephen, except Stephen had little tufts of hair on the back of his fingers. I thought that was so virile. I don't see them now.'

"Stephen didn't seem to mind being discussed in the third person or to be offended that the woman was searching for differences. He merely smiled and held up his hands. 'They're there.'

"She said, 'It should be darker.'

"Stephen said, 'Remember the time I tripped over my two left feet while we were dancing and my hand slipped out of yours and you said it was because it was so smooth?'

Artemis's face lit up. She turned to me and said, 'Yes, that did happen.'

" 'And you remember I apologized for being a clumsy dancer, and you kept saying I was a good dancer, but I knew you were just being sweet and trying to make me feel better. Remember, Artemis?'

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"She said, happily, 'Yes, I remember! Hello, Stephen. I'm glad it's you.'

" 'Thanks for recognizing me, Artemis,' he said. 'I'd have been in considerable trouble if you hadn't.'

"I interrupted—a bit irritably, I suppose—'Wait, Miss Cataldo. Don't rush to conclusions.'

"He said, 'Is *that* your last name, Artemis? They asked me, but I didn't know. You'd never told me.'

"I waved him quiet. I said, 'Ask him some questions, Miss Cataldo—little things that he ought to get right.'

"She flushed. 'Did you ever kiss me, Stephen?'

"Stephen looked a little embarrassed. 'I did once—just once. In the taxi, remember?'

"I didn't give her a chance to reply. I said sharply, 'The details, Stephen.'

"He shrugged. 'We were in a taxi being driven to a place called Spittal Pond, a bird refuge that Artemis wanted to see. She teased me because I said how pleasant it was to be with a young woman who wanted to see bird refuges and not nightclubs. She said that by the following week I'd have forgotten her completely and wouldn't even remember her name. I said, "What? Forget Artemis, the chaste huntress?" I reached over her and wrote the name on the car window on the left. It was a humid day and there was a thin film of moisture on it.'

" 'Where does the kiss come in?' I demanded.

" 'I was seated on her right,' said Stephen, 'and I reached across her with my right arm to write her name. My left arm was on the back of the seat.' He showed me how it was, stretching his left arm behind an imaginary Artemis and pushing his right hand across in front so that his arms nearly enclosed her. 'I had just finished writing her name when the taxi lurched for some reason. My elbow nearly collided with the driver's head and I grabbed Artemis's shoulder to steady myself—and there I was embracing her. I found the position so irresistible that I kissed her.' He smiled. 'Only on the cheek, I'm sorry to say.'

"I looked at the woman. Her eyes were shining. She said, 'That's exactly how it happened, Mr. Koenig. This is Stephen, all right. There's no question about it.'

Stephen smiled with a touch of triumph and I said, 'Very well. You can leave now, Miss Cataldo—thank you for your help.'

"And that's it . . ."

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Koenig stopped talking and looked at the Black Widowers with his eyebrows raised.

Gonzalo said explosively, "That's *it?* I thought you said you cracked his alibi."

"So I did. But you wanted me to tell you about the alibi so that *you* could break it down."

"And you haven't left out anything?"

"Nothing essential," said Koenig.

Avalon cleared his throat and said, "I presume you found Stephen Two. That would break the alibi."

"So it would," said Koenig cheerfully. "But we never found Stephen Two, I'm sorry to say."

Halstead said, "Is it possible that Miss Whatsername was paid off? That she was lying?"

"If she was," said Koenig, "we found no evidence to back it. In any case, the alibi was broken quite apart from anything she said or didn't say. —Have any of you gentlemen visited Bermuda?"

There was a general silence and then Gonzalo said, "I was taken there when I was four years old. I don't remember anything."

Trumbull said, "Are you hinting that Stephen got some of the places in Bermuda wrong? Was it that there was no bird refuge of the kind he mentioned or no Princess Hotel or something like that?"

"No, he got all the places correct. No mistakes that we could find as far as the geography or sights were concerned."

Again there was a silence until Drake finally said, "Henry, is there anything about this that strikes you as making sense?"

Henry, who was just returning from the reference shelf, said, "I can't speak through first-hand knowledge because I, too, have never been in Bermuda, but it's possible that what the man Mr. Koenig calls Stephen said may prove he was never there, either."

Drake said, "Why? What did he say?"

Henry said, "Mr. Koenig ended his tale with the account of the kiss in the taxi, so I thought perhaps something about that account broke the alibi. Bermuda is a British crown colony and it strikes me that it may follow British custom as far as traffic is concerned. I've just checked the *Columbia Encyclopedia* and it says nothing about that, but it is a possibility.

"If in Bermuda traffic is always on the left, as it is in Great Britain, the automobiles must have the steering wheel, and therefore the driver, on the right side of the front seat. If Stephen was sitting to the young woman's right and reached over her to write her name

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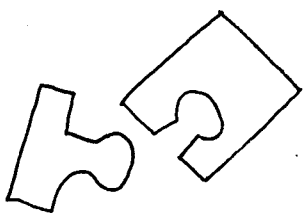
on the left-hand window exactly as he said, he could scarcely have nearly struck the driver's head when the taxi lurched. The driver would have been on the other side.

"I imagine Stephen Two told Stephen about the kissing incident, but neglected to mention the matter of the steering wheel or the driver, taking for granted he would be aware of the difference. Stephen adding the matter of the driver for verisimilitude was his great mistake, for undoubtedly Mr. Koenig saw the point at once."

Koenig sat back in his chair and smiled admiringly. "That's very good, Henry."

"Not at all. The praise is yours, Mr. Koenig," said Henry. "I knew you had broken the alibi, I knew you had done it by reason, and I knew that the reasoning had to be deduced from the facts you gave us. You, in breaking the alibi, didn't have the advantage of that special knowledge."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

History will judge whether any of the current crop of private-eye writers belong in the exalted company of Hammett and Chandler, but it seems safe to say that there are more good series sleuths of the for-hire variety currently operating than ever before. Below are new cases for six of the best, all highly distinctive characters and each operating in a different locale, though half call some part of California home. As it happens, four of them are women and two men. (I never claimed this was a random sample.)

**** Linda Barnes: *The Snake Tattoo,* St. Martin's, $17.95. Carlotta Carlyle, who supplements her detecting income by driving a Boston cab, takes on two apparently unrelated cases: trying to locate a hooker with the titular snake on her leg for her cop friend Mooney, currently suspended and under investigation by the force, and looking for the vanished girl friend of a rich sixteen-year-old prep-school student. There's also a comic subplot involving the plumbing in her apartment. Carlotta's first book-length case, *A Trouble of Fools* (1987), was a deserving Edgar nominee, and this one is very nearly as good.

**** Sue Grafton: *"F" Is for Fugitive,* Holt, $15.95. Kinsey Millhone, who normally operates out of Santa Teresa (i.e., Santa Barbara), here travels to Floral Beach, hired by dying Royce Fowler to prove son Bailey innocent of a seventeen-year-old murder. Grafton manages a large cast and a complicated plot with extraordinary skill, and Kinsey's narration is as enjoyable as ever.

*** Marcia Muller: *There's Something in a Sunday,* Mysterious, $15.95. Sharon McCone, investigator for San Francisco's All-Souls Law Co-operative, confronts a tantalizing problem: why does Frank Wilkinson, a ranch manager from Hollister, spend his one day off purposefully surveying the City's nurseries, markets, and gardens without stopping to smell the flowers? Muller is a thoroughly reliable builder of puzzles, and if you spot the killer in this one, you're a sharper sleuth than I.

*** Maxine O'Callaghan: *Hit and Run,* St. Martin's, $14.95. Orange County operative Delilah West, victim of a teenage hit-run driver, tries to prove the elderly man who did *not* survive the incident was really murdered. West is among the toughest of the female P.I.s, and her third book-length case (not second, as the blurb proclaims) is strong in all areas: plot, pace, style, and evocation of locale. (O'Callaghan was one of several good writers to debut in the short-lived Raven Books paperback line. Now if some publisher would bring Richard A. Moore back . . .)

**** Robert Irvine: *The Angels'*

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Share, St. Martin's, $15.95. Salt Lake City private eye Moroni Traveler is hired by a Mormon bishop to find his daughter's fiance, who vanished when in the last month of a mission to England. The ensuing case, which also involves a series of Ripper-like slayings, is intensely readable and even better than the first Traveler book, *Baptism for the Dead* (1988). The background of Salt Lake in the heat of July is vividly realized, and Traveler's relationships (with his ailing father, his troubled ex-girl friend, and a boyhood friend who is now a high official of L.D.S. church) take on added depth and complexity.

*** Les Roberts: *A Carrot for the Donkey,* St. Martin's, $16.95. In his third case, actor/private eye Saxon goes over some very familiar jumps, including the privileged wandering daughter, the Mexican jail, painful beatings followed by sex, and a variation on one of the hard-boiled wrapups most honored by overuse. But he does it all with undeniable skill, including a special touch with atmosphere and action.

** Elliott Roosevelt: *Murder in the Oval Office,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The best feature of the latest Eleanor Roosevelt mystery consists of the insider's view it offers of the FDR administration's early days. A full-dress Thirties-style whodunit is offered, complete with the titular locked room and a gathering-of-the-suspects in the same venue, but the solution to the locked room is so elementary and obvious it's incredible that only the First Lady could come up with it—and the murderer's identity is unlikely to knock many readers out of their chairs.

Sisters in Crime (Berkley, $3.95), edited by Marilyn Wallace, is a real bargain: an anthology of 22 stories by contemporary women writers, most but not all members of the organization from which the book takes its title. Except for the stories by Sara Paretsky (from *AHMM*), Dorothy Salisbury Davis (from *EQMM*), and Linda Barnes (from *New Black Mask*), all are brand new, and the consistently high quality and variety (tough and cozy, realistic and supernatural, funny and grim) make it one of the best original mystery anthologies ever published. Three of the series private eyes reported on above appear in shorter cases here: Barnes's Carlotta Carlyle in the justly admired "Lucky Penny," Muller's Sharon McCone in especially good form in a case involving a computer dating service, and Grafton's Kinsey Millhone in a mystery fan's mystery involving a club of mystery readers. Other series sleuths represented are Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, Julie Smith's Rebecca Schwartz, and Susan Kelly's Liz Connors. Also contributing are Elizabeth Peters/Barbara Michaels (one story under each name, an Egyptian Sherlockian pastiche and a modern ghost story, the first fiction of less than novel length I've seen from this versatile author), Carolyn Wheat, Faye Kellerman, Mickey Friedman, Susan Dunlap, Dorothy Cannell, editor Wallace, and others heretofore better known

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for novels than for short stories.

At one time, readers sufficiently immersed in the genre to want to read *about* mysteries as well as reading the works themselves found relatively slim pickings: newspaper views, occasional books and magazine articles, plus the story introductions in *EQMM*. But in the past twenty years, all that has changed. Books about mysteries are plentiful enough to have their own Edgar award, and an astonishing number of periodicals, amateur and professional, are devoted to the field, though admittedly not as many as the science fiction genre has inspired.

The pioneering general fanzine, *The Armchair Detective,* was founded in 1967 by Allen J. Hubin. Now a handsomely produced professional quarterly in its twenty-second year, it continues to offer a mix of articles, reviews, and regular columns by writers as varied and formidable as Jacques Barzun, Edward D. Hoch, William L. DeAndrea, and publisher Otto Penzler, along with writers like Charles Shibuk and Marvin Lachman, who have been contributors from the beginning. Current editor is Kathy B. Daniel, who recently succeeded Michael Seidman. Subscriptions are $20.00 in the U.S., $24.00 elsewhere. Write TAD, 129 West 56th Street, New York, NY 10019.

A newer but equally desirable publication is *Mystery Scene,* published by mystery writers Ed Gorman and Bob Randisi. Though its bimonthly issues are directed toward writers, editors, and agents working in the field, with many *Publishers Weekly*-type news notes, the reviews, author interviews, and other features have much to offer the fan as well. Regular contributors include such provocative writers as William Campbell Gault, Bill Pronzini, Warren Murphy, Brian Garfield, Orania Papazoglou, and Max Allan Collins. The contents are steadily expanding, and attention is also paid to science fiction, horror, comics, and westerns. Subscriptions are $35.00 per year from Mystery Enterprises, 3840 Clark Road S.E., Cedar Rapids, IA 52403.

Quite different but equally enthralling for the serious fan is *Mystery and Detective Monthly,* edited by Robert S. Napier. Recently achieving its fiftieth issue, this fanzine is almost entirely made up of letters from readers. Its stimulating, sometimes combative correspondents include a number of well known pros: Herbert Resnicow, Michael Avallone, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., Bill Crider, and Josh Pachter, to name just a few. Issues are $3.00 each from Bob Napier, 14411-C South C Street, Tacoma, WA 98444.

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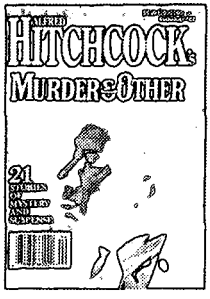

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DETECTIVERSE

INTO EACH LIFE A LITTLE REIGN

by MARGUERITE BURANELLI

All day they plotted, gangland style,
Who would live or bite the dust.
The first name on the list was Byle—
They said, "Let's ax him, it's a must."

The next was lovely Hilda G.—
They pondered long about her fate,
But in the end it was agreed
The spy must die, she didn't rate.

They came to bandits Smith and Brown—
The public used to like them so:
"Not good enough, let's melt them down,
"These outlaws simply have to go."

And thus the plotters made their plans—
A scary business, it would seem,
This talk of death and deadly scams
At Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

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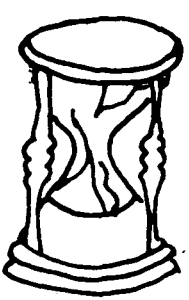

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a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story by

JEREMIAH HEALY

Cuddy was having a conversation with his dead wife.

A parakeet?

"Beth, that's what I said."

How do you find a parakeet?

"I don't think I do."

Then what are you going to do?

"Mrs. Addison had the bird for barely a week. Not much time for someone to know she had it. Except for the pet shop, which not only knew she bought it but had her address from the delivery."

Yes, but if there was something valuable about the bird they wouldn't have sold it to her in the first place, would they?

"You have a better place to start?"

Jeremiah Healy is a graduate of Rutgers College and Harvard Law School. In 1978, he joined the faculty of New England School of Law in Boston, becoming a full professor in 1983. His first novel, Blunt Darts, *was selected by* The New York Times *as one of the seven best mysteries of 1984. His latest novel,* Yesterday's News, *about John Francis Cuddy, has just been published by Harper & Row . . .*

BERTIE'S MOM

by JEREMIAH HEALY

"Parakeet?"

"Parakeet, Mr. Cuddy. Powder-blue chest, grey-and-black head and wings."

The woman sitting across from me was nudging seventy, with

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white hair in a bun and the style of tweed suit Boston's Irish call "Yankee Sensible." However, she wore makeup that flattered her features and the hair was swept up rather than pulled back. There also was a sparkle in her eye that I hoped indicated awareness rather than madness.

"Mrs. Addison, I can't find a parakeet."

"You are a private investigator, are you not?"

"I am."

"Licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts?"

I gestured to the wall behind me. "Just like it says behind the glass."

She squinted to make out the calligraphy on the framed copy of the license. "John—Francis—Cuddy."

"Correct," I said.

"Then why won't you help me?"

"It's not a matter of won't. It's a matter of can't. Look, you say someone broke into your apartment—"

"My townhouse. My late husband and I owned the entire building on Marlborough Street."

"But all they took was the parakeet."

"Yes. I conducted a careful inventory, and nothing else was taken, not even some very valuable pieces."

"Why would someone risk a burglary to steal a parakeet?"

"I've no idea. Neither did the idiot policemen who responded to my complaint. They smiled at each other and took perfunctory notes, but they obviously believed me mad as a hatter."

I watched her for a moment. "I don't think you're mad, Mrs. Addison."

She softened. "I know. One's sense of humor doesn't necessarily improve with age. One's sense of being humored does, and you're not doing that with me. What you can't understand is why I'm here at all."

"That's right."

"Are you married, Mr. Cuddy?"

"Like yourself."

An uplifted brow. "Widower?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, you seem—so young to—I'm sorry."

"Please finish your thought."

Mrs. Addison took a breath and held it. Then, "The police said not to worry about it. They said, 'These things happen, lady.' Well, that

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burglar took not only Bertie but also my—privacy, my security. Can you understand that?"

"Yes."

"I have no enemies, Mr. Cuddy. It's not that I've outlived them. Emmett and I were both born into money, and we never cheated anyone on anything, so this wasn't some twisted act of vengeance. I admit I quickly grew attached to Bertie, even thought of him as a particularly undemanding child. But more basically I want to know who did this and why. I'm used to paying for indulging myself. I expect your services to be no exception."

I thought about it. "I'll give it two days."

"Thank you."

"You have a photo of the bird and his cage?"

"No. But I can show you the cage."

"I don't get you."

"Whoever it was stole only Bertie, Mr. Cuddy. The cage was left behind."

We were enjoying a fine autumn day, bell-clear with the bite of the Montreal Express on the front edge of the northwest wind. Her townhouse was between Clarendon and Dartmouth, a twenty-minute stroll across the Common and Public Garden from my office and only a few blocks from where I live. On the walk over, we talked about Wellesley College during the Great Depression, her husband's service in North Africa, and how the absence of children from a marriage can make it stronger.

Marlborough Street is a distinctive part of Back Bay. Tall, black gaslight lampposts. Three- and four-story townhomes of variously colored stones with bay windows and tiny front lawns cum flower gardens behind low, wrought-iron fences. The sidewalks, free-laid brick rather than poured cement, turn into narrow, mogulled skating rinks once the sleet starts to fall.

Mrs. Addison's front doorway displayed a security-company decal. As we went through, I said, "Where was the break-in?"

"A cellar window, around back. I know I should have had them barred or alarmed, especially living here alone, but they were so small I didn't think I needed to worry."

There was a cramped sitting room on the first floor, the Victorian way of escrowing visitors till the folks above were ready to receive them. Dining room and kitchen lay to the back past the lovely, curving staircase.

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In the kitchen, she flicked on some lights and opened the cellar door. Following, I passed the assortment of possessions a couple might accumulate over fifty years of living in the same house. I felt warm, at ease.

"There."

I followed her angled arm to the boarded-over space of a smashed casement window. Probably ground level at the alley behind the building, it began nearly six feet above the cellar floor but measured only a foot by two feet at the most.

I said, "We're not looking for a big one, then."

"No. You can see where he landed from the scuffing at the base of the wall there."

I walked over. Not enough to be much help, the tread seemed to be a loafer or oxford rather than an athletic shoe. Odd choice, given the climbing and running needs of most B&E artists.

"This dust tracked through the house?"

"Yes. It seems as though he went out this way, too."

"Why do you say that?"

"No dust or smudges around either of the doors, and no alarm sounded."

As we climbed back to the first floor, I said, "Where were you when it happened?"

"I don't know."

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't know when it *did* happen, Mr. Cuddy. I'd only bought Bertie last week. On Thursday—when the break-in occurred—I visited an antique dealer, a bookstore, a bakery. I was in and out, both morning and afternoon. It could have happened any time prior to four, when I saw that Bertie's cage was empty."

We went up to the second floor, the front room a large parlor overlooking Marlborough Street, the rear room a study with studded leather chairs and floor-to-ceiling bookcases. The parlor contained print loveseats of delicate construction, oriental rugs and end-tables, and a magnificent marble fireplace. The only place in the room I wouldn't be afraid to sit was on the floor.

"That was Bertie's."

In one window of the draped bay stood a tall, bent pole with a large and ornate cage suspended from it—a giant snake lamp grown too big for its desk.

Up close, I inspected the intricate, braided-wire work, all of it gold, at least in color. Red velvet lined the outside lower perimeter

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of the cage. The velvet was cut carefully and fitted with a small drawer. I tugged on the knob.

"The drawer is for the bird's medicine or toys, I imagine. Wonderful craftsmanship. I'm afraid it was the cage rather than Bertie that attracted me in the first place."

I slid the drawer all the way out, turning it over. Three inches wide, five inches long, not even two inches deep. There was some discoloration on the back end of the drawer. Sticky. "Where did you buy it?"

"A pet store near my salon. I'd never gone in there before, but it was raining and I didn't want to ruin my permanent. The proprietor was so rude I very nearly didn't stay long enough to spot this."

I replaced the drawer. It slid a quarter of an inch too far along its track. I used the knob to ease it flush with the velvet covering around it. "How did you get it home?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In the rain and all. How did you get the cage and Bertie home?"

"Oh. As I said, the manager or whatever was terribly rude. But I finally was able to persuade him to deliver it."

"You have the receipt?"

"I believe so."

"May I see it?"

I played with the cage door and the perches while she shuffled off to the study. No way Bertie could have gotten out on his own.

She returned with a pink slip and handed it to me. The printing above Mrs. Addison's name and address read "Niles Pet Emporium, for the Discriminating Fancier." The neighborhood was near Beth's hillside.

"I'll be in touch, Mrs. Addison."

A parakeet?

"Beth, that's what I said." Straightening up, I watched the windsurfers, wearing wetsuits, brave the cold and chemicals of Boston harbor below the cemetery. The breeze was fairly stiff, the petals on Mrs. Feeney's roses fluttering like tiny flags.

How do you find a parakeet?

"I don't think I do."

Then what are you going to do?

"Mrs. Addison had the bird for barely a week. Not much time for someone to know she had it. Except for the pet shop, which not only knew she bought it but had her address from the delivery."

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Yes, but if there was something valuable about the bird they wouldn't have sold it to her in the first place, would they?

"You have a better place to start?"

Driving toward Niles Pet Emporium, I passed the new Continental Trailways Bus Terminal. Trailways used to have space over by the Statler Hotel. Then urban renewal erupted, the Statler became the Park Plaza, and out went the terminal, bars like the Hillbilly Ranch, and strip joints like the Mousetrap Cafe. The local color was replaced by the monolithic Massachusetts Transportation Building and its five thousand office workers, not to mention four-hundred-thousand-dollar condos fronting on Boston Common.

The pet store was tucked into a structure near the Boston Tea Party ship. No wonder Mrs. Addison chose it as a refuge from the rain. The puppies and kittens in the windows flanking the entrance rollicked and posed like accomplished actors.

Inside, the floors and counters were clean, the scent only mildly disinfectant. One wall held a bank of aquaria, the other cages of various birds, most of which I'd never seen before. I started toward a doorway in the back of the store that probably led to a stockroom.

"Help you with something?"

A man rose from behind a counter to my left. Medium height and balding, he was pot-bellied in a torn, dirty sweater. His forehead, nose, and cheeks were scaly—dandruff of the face.

"Are you Mr. Niles?"

"That's right."

"I'm interested in a bird—"

"Got a hundred of 'em. Look around, let me know if you see one I can help you with."

"A bird you already sold to somebody."

He wet his lips with his tongue, wiping his hands unconsciously on the sweater. "What's this all about?"

I showed him my identification. "Mrs. Emmett Addison. You sold her a parakeet last week. Somebody took it."

"Don't remember it."

"Older woman, around seventy. Stylish, sharp. You'd remember her."

"Like I said, I can't help you."

A female voice from the back said, "Mister Niles," but the accent made it sound like "Missah Nile"—an accent that yanked me back a lot of years and fourteen thousand miles.

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I turned. She was in her twenties somewhere, with the coal-black hair and fine features of a high-born Vietnamese urbanite. As she fumbled with some sort of food sack, I saw other familiar marks as well. A livid scar running from ear to neckline and a stump of wrist where her right hand should have been.

"Damn it, not now, Marie."

The bag, heavy and bulky, fell, splitting apart and cascading pellets, edible rather than appetizing, onto the floor.

"Damn it, girl. Those cost money!"

"Sorry."

"Now we'll have to use it ourselves rather than sell it."

"I clean up."

"That won't do it." He turned to me. "I gotta attend to this mess."

I let him get ten feet before I said, "Anybody ask you for Mrs. Addison's address?"

He faltered when he should have just kept going and waved me off. "I said I can't help you. Jesus, Marie, what's the matter with you?"

She looked up at me, doe eyes questioning. "Sorry."

I waited a block away, keeping the entrance to the store in my rearview mirror. I figured that Niles would have her leave before he counted the receipts. He did.

She drew even with me, the end of her right arm thrust into a jacket pocket.

I called quietly through the open passenger's-side window. "Marie?"

She didn't seem startled, just looked around to be sure Niles wasn't watching. She opened the door with her left hand and climbed in. "You cop?"

"No. Private investigator."

"You got ID?"

I took it out. "You wanted to talk with me?"

She nodded her head. "Drive."

I started the engine. "Where do you live?"

"Just drive, okay?"

"Okay."

I took us away from downtown, back toward South Boston, where there was some beach and less rush-hour traffic.

After a while, she said, "Nile a bastard."

"That's how he struck me."

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"I work for him three year, he treat me like—like he can't get no American help no more."

"Some bosses are like that. Makes it hard."

"You don't have to be nice to me. I tell you anyway."

"All right."

She looked out the window. A couple of kids, a boy and a girl, were playing catch with a tennis ball. The girl was better than the boy and uncorked a hard overhand, a rightie. Marie turned away.

"Nile think I can't get better job, way I look."

I didn't say anything.

"I find that cage in the back."

"The cage Mrs. Addison bought?"

Marie nodded. "That cage all dirty, under table in the back. Nile a pig, couldn't see how nice it was. I clean it up, tell him we put it out front."

"And Mrs. Addison bought it."

"She rich. She have the eye for nice things. I can tell." Marie dropped her tone a notch. "I can remember."

"You delivered it to her?"

"Nile try to tell her, 'Take it with you.' Stupid—woman like that don't take things with her. He come to back, I tell him. He get good dollar for cage. He finally say, 'Okay, we deliver.' "

"How?"

"How we deliver?"

"Yes."

"Company. I call. But that not what you want to know."

"No?"

"No."

We were at the Castle Island parking lot. I pulled in and turned off the engine.

Marie looked up at the massive stonework jutting out toward the harbor entrance. "Military?"

"At one time."

"Me, too. At one time."

There was no joking in her voice. Then, "Thursday, last week. Man come to store. Strange man, not very big. Want cage from Nile. Nile say sold. Man get angry, run around store to back, knock me over to look. Then go to register, throw around receipts."

"Like the man knew where they were?"

"Yes. Like the man know where we keep receipts. He take one,

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read it. Curse at Nile, then throw receipt in Nile face and run out to street."

"You said the man was strange."

"Strange look. Face, hands—hands all white. Like fish belly."

"Pale?"

"Like red-hair man, but he have brown hair. Like he never see sun."

"Anything else, Marie?"

"Nile know him."

"How could you tell?"

"Nile call him Ollie."

Reaching for my wallet, I said, "I appreciate your helping me."

"Don't want money. Just drop me T station."

"You don't have to take the subway. Let me at least give you a ride home."

"No." She looked at me, hard. "I don't want people see man like you drive me home." She turned back to look out the window. "They make fun of me."

There are lots of ways to find things out. One is to confront a person who lies to you. Like the good Mr. Niles. Sometimes, though, that leads to people who helped you and gets them into trouble. Like Marie. What I had was a name, probably a first name. If Ollie knew Niles and also knew where the receipts were kept, chances were he'd been an employee of the pet store sometime before Marie came on three years ago. What I needed were some friends with computers that weren't asleep yet.

A guy from my block back in Southie is a cop on the Capitol Police force. I called him and got the parking space behind the State House reserved for a legislator who's been in the House chambers about as often as Amelia Earhart. I walked down Beacon Hill to the C. F. Hurley Building in Government Center.

Jimmy Somogi was still at his desk in the Division of Employment Security. Jimmy was nearly always still at his desk. If the division could clone him, it would become the KGB of a full-employment totalitarian state.

"Jimmy, how's the boy?"

"No Irish glad hand, okay?"

Jimmy's folks were from Hungary originally. He came over after the revolt in 1956. His accent didn't mix that well in our neighbor-

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hood, and I pulled a couple of America First types off him in the schoolyard once.

"Jimmy, you cut me to the quick."

"What exactly is it you want this time?"

"Simple rundown. I have a name and a probable employer. I need current whereabouts."

Jimmy looked almost disappointed as he propelled himself to a keyboard and monitor. "Just the name would be faster."

"I think it's only a nickname, Jimmy."

He rolled his eyes. "And the employer's Raytheon, right?"

"No. Niles Pet Emporium, in Boston."

Jimmy started to clack the keys.

I continued, anyway. "Name's Ollie, spelled O-L-L-I-E, probably. Maybe short for—"

"Oliver. Oliver Toomey, NMI. Off Niles' books as of five—no, six years ago."

I looked at the screen. "You are truly frightening, Jimmy."

"Name's odd enough, the no-middle-initial won't be a problem. You want current employer?"

"Right."

More clacking. A frown. More clacking still. A head shake. "No good."

"Meaning?"

"Old Ollie ain't gainfully employed in this commonwealth no longer."

I recalled Marie's description of Niles' visitor. "That's what I thought."

Jimmy cocked his head at me.

Detective Cross of Homicide was in a chair, eating a cruller and slurping coffee from a styrofoam cup that didn't seem to be on its maiden voyage from the wrapper.

"Hi."

She looked up from an array of crime-scene photos. "Murphy's not here."

"I know. I need to speak to you about something."

"Not interested."

"Please."

She sighed, turning the photos face down so I couldn't see them. "Three minutes."

"I need somebody to run a guy through the computer."

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"Why?"

I told her, embroidering a little.

She stared at me. "You're kidding."

I raised my hand to oath level. "God's truth."

Cross lowered her chin to her chest and stifled a laugh. "You realize what'd happen to your rep, I spread this around?"

"Uh huh. That's why I wanted to see you."

She raised her head, pursing her lips. "And the old woman, the cleaning lady, she had this bird how long?"

"Almost eight years."

"All right." She reached for a pad. "Guy's name?"

It took fifteen minutes to determine that Oliver NMI Toomey had spent his time since leaving Niles Pet Emporium as a guest of the State of Maine Corrections Department.

Augusta is pretty small for a state capital. Not impressive architecturally, it lies just east of Exit 16 on the Maine Turnpike. The foliage was spectacular on the drive north, but the road into the city itself is lined with motels, fast-food franchises, and car dealers.

Parole officer Quentin Causwell was a pleasantly plump young man about five years out of college and a hundred years old from his daily work. Dressed in khaki pants, an L. L. Bean plaid shirt, and a solid wool tie, he shook my hand and told me to take a seat.

"What can I do for you?"

I identified myself to his satisfaction. He leaned back in the swivel chair, tapping a pencil on his blotter. "Oliver Toomey, huh?"

"That's right."

"What kind of detail you need?"

"Last known address would be nice."

"Might want to know more than that."

Causwell went to a file cabinet, rifled through some folders, and carried one back to his seat. He flipped forward, then back a few times. "Investigating officers might remember more'n this, but it's a fair summary as they go. Seems this Toomey and a confederate stuck themselves up a bank. Toomey was from Boston, the confederate a local boy name of Houle." Causwell used the French Canadian pronunciation, like "school" without the "sch."

"Cross-reference on Toomey's discharge says Houle died in prison. Cancer. Police caught Houle with his share of the take, found Toomey's telephone number on top of a piece of paper on Houle's bedtable at home. Nobody ever said these boys were smart, I guess.

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Our boys matched up with some of yours down there and busted Toomey at work."

"Pet store?"

"Let me—Niles Pet Emporium sound right?"

"It does."

"Well, seems Toomey didn't have the goods on him or at his place down there. Don't see anything to show he cooperated. Wasn't a fortune—just over seventy thousand according to the count the bank did. Houle had thirty-five and change when they got him, so figure Toomey's share'd be about the same."

"Unless there was another confederate."

Causwell looked at me thoughtfully. "Unless."

"How soon after the robbery did the cops nail Toomey down in Boston?"

"Next morning, looks like."

"Can I have that current address now?"

"Sure can. Hope you enjoyed the drive."

"How's that?"

"Seems we let your Mr. Toomey go home to roost."

"Boston?"

Causwell lifted what looked like a reduced Xerox closer to his eyes. "Got a pencil?"

It was a rooming house in Charlestown, the obelisk of the Bunker Hill Monument rising like a science-fiction special effect in the distance. Given the gentrification of the streets around the Monument Square area, it was only a matter of time before people like Oliver Toomey wouldn't be able to live there any more.

Letting my car rest after the drive from Maine, I saw a short wiry man with pasty skin come up the sidewalk holding a grocery sack. He cradled it with both forearms the way a fullback does when his team's leading in the last two minutes and the other guys are trying to strip the ball. Like you might carry something through a prison yard.

He turned into the doorway of the rooming house. I got out of my car and approached.

"Mr. Toomey?"

His head whipped around, jaws working overtime on some gum as he checked for who spoke and how many were with me.

"I'm by myself, Mr. Toomey."

"Who are you?"

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I showed him. "Can we talk?"

"About what?"

"About six years ago?"

He muttered something I wasn't meant to hear. Then, "Upstairs."

The steps were warped and the bulb was dim, but I didn't sense he wanted to jump me. I followed him up to his room and into it.

Toomey had a cubbyhole refrigerator, into which he stuffed some of the items from the sack. I took the only chair in the room, a ladderback missing two rungs. He closed the fridge and slumped onto the iron bed, head drooped and hands wringing as though he were waiting outside a maternity ward.

"So talk," he said.

"Six years ago you and a guy named Houle stuck up a bank. You got caught, but without your share of the money. Then you break into a woman's house to steal a parakeet she bought at your old employer's petshop. Why?"

At first I couldn't place the sound—then I realized it was laughter. That muffled I'm-in-church hysteria I remembered from being a kid.

"Toomey?"

The muffled sound got louder, but not from laughter any more. He was crying, crying his heart out.

"Toomey!"

He shouted at the floor. "Sweet Mary, Mother of God! That's what's going to send me back?"

"What are you talking about?"

He raised his head. "Look, I tell you what happened, straight-jake exactly what happened, can you cut me a break here? Not violate my parole?"

"I won't know that till I hear it."

Toomey lay down, the back of his hand wiping his eyes, then covering them to block the light. I felt like a psychiatrist staring at his couch.

"Marty—Marty Houle—Marty and me met drinking one night, he tells me about this bank back where he's from in Maine there, a pushover. I'm making squat at the pet store, Niles treating me like something a dog puked up, so I call in sick and I go for it. The job goes down clean, nobody hurt, but some girl in the bank recognizes Marty's voice, even behind the mask and all, so the cops up there are on him like a blanket. Only I come down from Maine with my share in this gym bag not knowing any of that. I get in by bus—Trailways had a late one, but I'm not stupid enough to carry

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the cash with me that time of night, guys you might run into. So I stash the bag in a locker at the terminal there and I go home, thinking I'm rich. I go to work the next day, figuring to act natural. No reason to pick up the bag till that night, see?"

"I see."

"So I'm at work, in the back room, just chewing some gum and thinking about what I'm gonna do with the money, and I hear a car pull up through the door to the alley. I figure it's some delivery. Then I hear somebody out front asking Niles about me, and he says "Police?" just like that. So I look around fast, see this old cage, and take the gum outa my mouth and the locker key outa my pocket and stick the whole works to the back of this little drawer thing in the cage there."

Toomey rolled his head on the pillow. "I couldn't believe Marty would've sold me, so I figured the cops had squat, I'm back on the streets in a week. Uh-unh. It's back to Maine, no bail, and a lawyer who pleads me before I see his name spelled out on the paperwork.

"Then six years, I'm like a model prisoner. I get my parole and I con the parole guy into letting me hitch down here fast as I can."

"You went to the shop first."

"Yeah, yeah. I went there. Niles recognized me and remembered the cage right away. I could see in his eyes something was hinky. I near took the head off some slant he had working in the back, but the cage is gone. Sold off." Toomey levered up on an elbow and stared at me. "You got any idea what it's like, doing a long six, an hour at a time, then you find out you're like two days late to pick up the key?"

"Go on."

"I get the Addison broad's address from Niles. Her house—you seen it?"

"I saw it."

"I get in there and get the key, no sweat, but when I go to the terminal to where it was, it—it wasn't."

"Just the big brown office building."

"Yeah, yeah—I couldn't believe it! I thought I was dreaming or something, you know? It's gone, all gone. Everything even that was around it. Just gone!"

God knew what happened to the money when they were taking apart the lockers. But I had a different question.

"Toomey?"

"Yeah?"

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"Why did you take the bird?"

"Huh?"

"The parakeet in the cage. You had the key, you didn't take anything else. Even with the broken window and the tracks you made from the cellar, if nothing was missing she wouldn't have gone past the cops to hire me. Why did you take the bird?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't."

"No. I just took it out of the cage, opened a window there, and let him go."

"What?"

"I just let him go."

"Why?"

"You gotta remember. I was standing there, in her living room, with that key in my hand. I looked at the bird, behind bars like I'd been for six years. I thought about working over in the pet store there, how Niles never let none of the animals run around or nothing, and—and I just decided to let him out of his cage, too."

"Jesus."

Toomey worked his mouth a few times. "So how about it, buddy? Can you cut me a break on this B&E thing here?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. It's up to Bertie's mom."

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Norman had been married for two years, he told Ginger, but it was over. His wife had gone to live at her mother's place in Laceville. The lawyers were working on the divorce.

"She'll be back. As soon as she hears about the lottery. What's her name?"

"Jane. But we don't like each other any more. She'll remain in Laceville."

"Yeah, sure." Ginger produced a knowing smile . . .

POP GOES THE WEASEL

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Norman Harris used his briefcase to nudge open the apartment door. He stood on the porch looking at the doorframe. Splintered wood around the mortice-lock showed where the jimmy had gone in. He peered into his living room, afraid to enter if the burglar was still inside.

"Hello?"

Back came silence and familiar smells. Everything looked in order, the place had not been trashed. He moved inside and operated the light-switch with the elbow of his tweed jacket. Maybe the cops would find fingerprints, but he doubted it.

Taking inventory, he saw his miniature TV was gone. So was his new camera. Some silver frames. His coin collection. You had to look closely to determine that anyone had been here. Some devious villain had been and gone, taking only lightweight items of value.

He was glad Jane had moved out. His wife would now be ranting. Yelling at the police on the telephone. Making things frenetic and not helping. Having dialed three times because she kept hitting

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wrong numbers. Nothing mechanical came easily to Jane. Even the divorce was a classic of inefficiency. She had changed lawyers in midstream and missed the main meeting because her car wouldn't start when she lost her key and the spare wouldn't turn. That afternoon, Harris drove the eighty miles to Laceville where the car was parked outside her mother's house. After a couple of tries, he was able to turn the key.

Harris now called the police. A uniformed cop and a plainclothes detective showed up. They looked around and said it was one of a series. Slick and sophisticated. No use dusting for fingerprints, there would be none. All they could do, and they did it, was make a list of the missing articles.

"And my State Lottery ticket," Norman concluded. "It was on the TV set and it's gone."

The detective grinned. "There goes six million dollars."

When the officers went away, Norman telephoned Sid Hamilton to see if he wanted a drink. He felt like getting out of his apartment and Sid was the only guy at the ad agency who would give him the time of day.

Ginger Pitt left the goods in her shoulderbag. Tomorrow, Saturday, she would drive down to Sam Acton's and sell them. With three successful break-ins this week, it looked to Ginger as if Sam would give her something like $1,800.

Ginger put on the kettle. It sure beat working as a temp/sec. Here she was, home at four o'clock, her day had not been filled with boring dictation and typing, and no creepy boss had tried to put his hands on her. Those years were gone forever. Instead, she had driven in her expensive car through good neighborhoods. She had rung a few doorbells. When somebody answered, she faked a question about Mrs. Cleveland. ("Isn't this Meridian Street? Sorry, I'm at the wrong house.") When nobody answered, she took the big screwdriver from her bag, jammed it in below the lock, twisted as she drove with her shoulder, and pop goes the weasel. Even a mortice-lock is no protection when the doorframe shatters.

About fifteen seconds was enough time to get inside. Then, using her practiced eye, and acting on Sam's advice, she picked up the items he could most readily sell. Minutes later, she was gone down the walk, into her car, and out of the district at a leisurely pace. She felt some guilt, but not much. She never destroyed a place and she only took a few items from each. And these were people who

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could afford it—insured people. True, the occupant would suffer the nauseating feeling of violation, but that would pass.

Ginger's best sleep came not in bed at night, but whenever she lay on the sofa fully dressed with one of the TV channels playing low. A couple of hours could ease by this way with her mind safely anchored to the pictures and sound across the room. At eight o'clock, she got up, put the frozen beef taquitos in the oven, poured salsa from a jar into a small bowl, and opened a bottle of Bertoli soave. With a tray of the food and wine, she sat down in her big leather chair and watched part of a game show, waiting for Sherlock Holmes to come on. Basil Rathbone had been fine in his time, but now she was hooked on Jeremy Brett as the great detective.

Between programs, the station showed the weekly lottery drawing. Ping-pong balls with numbers on them rolled down a clear-plastic trough. Ginger reached for her ticket and made the comparison. No luck again. She crumpled the ticket and dropped it on the tray. Then, for almost an hour, she was in another world. Holmes took on Moriarty. Never mind that the villain was the unforgettable Soames Forsyte from another series. Lean men in black fought hand-to-hand on a precipice. Their bodies fell twisting against a backdrop of cascading water.

Ginger did some clearing up. She felt seedy from the wine. But once she opened a bottle, she couldn't resist finishing it. To divert herself, she did a quick inventory of the loot in her shoulderbag—and found beneath a camera the last victim's lottery ticket. She read the numbers. They looked incredibly right. There was a telephone service you could call, she had it listed in her book. She found it and dialed.

"Thank you for calling the official lottery-winners hotline. Numbers drawn tonight were 7-19-22-35-37-41."

Ginger listened to the repeat, her mind frozen. This was the winning ticket! Finally she put down the telephone. She was holding a lottery ticket worth six million dollars! Turning it over, she saw the name, address, and telephone number written on the back in ink. Could she erase the writing and replace it with her own name? Never. The slightest indication of tampering would render the ticket invalid.

She had two options. She could telephone the man whose apartment she had burgled. The name was Norman Harris. She would have to admit the theft and leave it up to him. They could cash it

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together, five million for him, one for her. Otherwise she could tear it up.

Ginger put the kettle on again and made strong coffee. Her heart was pounding as she faced the excitement of the telephone call.

Norman took the plastic swizzle-stick from his glass and placed it on the bar exactly parallel with the other three sticks. He kept this precise tally of his drinks because it annoyed Sid Hamilton. "That slime is lucky he wasn't still there when I got home," he said. The booze was in full cry. "I would have killed him."

Hamilton was the oldest man in the agency creative department—he was forty-one. Bald and tall and heavy, he wore crisp new overalls with many pockets. On a day threatening rain, he carried a collapsible umbrella tucked into a narrow pocket on the left leg below the knee. He said to the young account executive, "Talk is cheap. If you're serious, do what I've done."

"A booby trap?" Norman had been invited inside Hamilton's flat one evening, standing back while Sid reached down and deactivated whatever the hookup was that would fire the shotgun if an intruder walked in. The weapon was clamped to a chair and aimed chest-high at the doorway. Taut wires were rigged to pull the trigger. "That contraption would never work. It's a joke."

"Want to try getting in someday when I'm not home?" Sid challenged. "I've tested that sucker. It works."

They drank for another hour. Sid informed Norman he was too tough to be a wimp and too insensitive to be a nerd. Norman told Sid he considered that a compliment. The copywriter took from one of his pockets an audio-cassette, the music track from a film set in New Orleans. He raved about the infectious sound of accordion, washboard, and drums. Norman couldn't imagine what he was talking about.

"I put on my earphones," Sid said, "I turn up the volume, I'm in another world."

"World War Three will happen," Norman warned him. "You'll miss it."

When he came back and let himself in, Norman frowned at the new wood in the doorframe and the new lock. The emergency service had done the job before he went out. Time, and conversation with Sid, had distanced him from the nasty feeling of violation.

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Now he was back. And he had to face the nuisance of filing an insurance claim.

The telephone rang when he was in the bathroom. By the time he got to it, there was only a dial tone.

He was in his pajamas and about to fall into bed when it rang again.

"Hello?" he said.

"Is this Norman Harris?" It was a woman's voice. A confident one.

"Himself."

"Are you sitting down? This may blow your mind. I was in your apartment this afternoon."

Three seconds silence. "You— Tell him to give back my things."

"Why does there have to be a man? There was only me."

"I'll get you. I promise."

"Listen to what I'm saying. Did you hear the lottery numbers tonight?"

"I just got in." He remembered. "You took my ticket."

"Do you recall the numbers on it?"

"I always play the same set of numbers."

"Well, they came up. Your ticket is the big winner."

"What?"

"You can check it if you want. But take my word, your ticket is worth six mill."

Norman swore for ten seconds. Then he said, "Finally my ship comes in, and it sinks in the harbor."

"You haven't lost anything."

"You've got the ticket."

"But it has your name and address on it."

"Hey, yes."

"Hey, *yes*. To be cashed, it needs you and your ID. It's just a scrap of paper without you, Mr. Harris." She waited a beat. "You sound young."

"I'm thirty-one."

"I'm older than you. What do we do with this?"

Euphoria began to burst and flood through Norman like spring sap. "Yahoo! It's hitting me! Six million bucks—no more money worries ever again!"

"How does this work? I'm a thief. I burgled your apartment."

"A few hundred dollars' worth. Forget it. Come on over, bring the ticket."

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"I'll meet you, but I won't have it with me. If you bring in the cops, I'll deny this conversation. You'll never see that ticket."

She was in a position to do huge damage if he made the wrong move. But she needed him, too. Norman made himself calm down. "Do you know Central Plaza? The benches near the fountain? I'll be there at noon tomorrow. It's not as crowded on Saturday as during the week. I'll be wearing a grey glen-check suit."

"I'll be there, without the ticket."

Before she could hang up, he said, "I don't know what you look like."

"They call me Ginger," she said. "That's my hair."

Bright sunlight broke between highrise office buildings as Norman crossed the plaza, heading for the fountain. Her hair gleamed red where she sat at the end of a bench. She smiled as she identified the suit. It was expensive, with vest.

"It isn't ginger," he said. "It's more auburn." He liked her broad, plain face and the fearlessness in the pale-green eyes.

She made room close to her although the rest of the bench was empty. "So. Isn't this a hell of a situation?"

"It seems simple to me. You *have* to turn over the ticket because I'm the only one who can cash it."

"No, you could turn over your ID to me and I could give it to a friend who goes through the cashing—then we give you half."

"Forget that. Anyway, there's too much publicity on these big ones. When my name is announced, I'll have to be there."

Ginger smiled. "You could say we bought the ticket jointly."

"I suppose I could do that." His eyes met hers.

She laughed. "But what's to protect me? Once I've given you the ticket, you can walk."

"That's true. What guarantee can I give you?"

Now she began to let some anger show. It was calculated. "The hell with it. I don't need the agony. I'll just burn it and get back to business."

"Going into people's houses and spoiling their lives."

"What I take, they can afford."

Norman was afraid she'd leave. "How about this? I have seven grand in a fund. I can cash some insurance. I could raise around thirty thousand dollars. I'll give you that much up front."

"Hell, no. I want at least half a million. Get me out of this trap."

"Then you have to trust me. What do we do?"

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"Nothing." Ginger left the bench and walked quickly across the plaza. Spray from the fountain dampened her face. She turned and leveled a finger at him. "Don't try to follow me."

Norman went home. She had him because she had the ticket. If she was bloody-minded enough to destroy it, there was nothing he could do. But it was all so pointless. There was financial freedom there for both of them.

Baseball was on with the sound off at three o'clock when the doorbell rang. Nobody visited since Jane had moved back to Laceville, so he wasn't surprised when he opened the door and saw Ginger standing there.

"Come on in." He closed the door after her. "I won't give you the tour," he couldn't help saying, "you've been here."

"Someday you may understand why I do this."

"Because it beats working. There's no mystery."

She set down her shoulderbag, opened the clasp, and took out his camera, his TV, and his coin collection. Sam Acton had wanted the items badly. In his shop earlier, selling him the rest of the week's loot, she had almost let it go. Now she said, "Everything's here. No damage."

Norman wouldn't look at the stuff. "What a noble act," he said. "I guess I should reward you with a couple of million dollars."

Ginger laughed. "We have to come to some sort of arrangement."

"Then give me back my ticket. You have to trust me." He approached her with his arms outspread, his shoulders raised. She took a step backward, but his pose was only an exaggerated shrug. "I really am grateful to you. Sure, you broke in, but you didn't trash my place. And you had the courage to level with me about the robbery. You could have said you found the ticket and asked for a reward."

"So what do we do?"

He took a deep breath. "You'll think I'm crazy. But move in—live here. We'll keep an eye on each other. I won't go to work, you'll quit what you've been doing."

She smiled. "Okay."

"The ticket goes in. They make annual payments over twenty years. The first payment arrives in a month or so and you get half. We're both comfortable. After that, we decide what to do."

Ginger turned away. She began to walk slowly from one well kept room to another. "Where do I sleep?"

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"In the bedroom. I'll sleep on the couch. Until the money comes."

"You've got a deal."

Norman liked the change in his life. Suddenly he was proud of his apartment, the expensive furnishings from Orff's, paid for on the installment plan. He went to the refrigerator and brought back a magnum of champagne. "This calls for a celebration."

She accepted a glass. "You *always* keep bubbly on ice?"

"It was for our anniversary. But my wife left before it happened."

They touched glasses and sipped. Ginger settled onto the couch, drawing up her knees. "How long have you been married?"

"Two years." Norman relaxed in his big chair. "It's over. She's gone to live at her mother's place in Laceville. The lawyers are working on the divorce."

"She'll be back. As soon as she hears about the lottery. What's her name?"

"Jane. But we don't like each other any more. She'll remain in Laceville."

"Yeah, sure." Ginger produced a knowing smile.

Norman did the television interviews by himself. Jane telephoned and said the Laceville radio station had come around to her mother's house to tape a conversation. They wanted to know if she would be moving back to the city or if Norman would be joining her. Norman told her to cool it—when the first payment was received, he'd send her a check. She'd have nothing to complain about.

"Normie, why don't I move back?" she persisted. "Remember how we used to talk about traveling? We could *do* that now! Our differences were never that serious. We were both stressed because money was tight."

"Forget it. You and I were a mistake from day one, Jane."

"You're exaggerating as usual."

"And you hate the way I exaggerate. So stay where you are and wait for the money."

Norman got off the telephone. Ginger was arranging the chairs in front of the TV, on either side of a table with matching trays of wieners, beans, brown bread, and two quarts of cold beer. On the screen, a beefy broadcaster was introducing the game of the week. "You've got a determined woman there," she said.

"A divorced woman. Or near as never mind."

"I predict a joyful arrival in one week."

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"Her lawyer called my lawyer and tried to cancel the proceedings. After *she's* been pushing to get it through. My lawyer said too late."

"I predict suitcases in the front hall."

"It's going to cost me," Norman said, "but I can afford it."

As they began watching the game, Ginger suggested, "Maybe I should move my stuff out of here."

"Stay put," Norman said.

One week later to the day, the cab driver deposited Jane's luggage inside the front door. Norman told her, "This is a bad idea."

"Who *found* this apartment? Who furnished it?" She noticed the new wood in the doorframe. "Who *did* that?"

"There was a break-in. Nothing serious—I lost some of my things."

Ginger drifted out of the bathroom. Norman introduced the two women and watched icicles form. The truth about Ginger wasn't in the script. He said, "We've been friends for a while—we bought the ticket together. She owns a one-quarter share."

"Lucky Ginger." Jane didn't believe a word of it. Not sure what to believe, she confronted her rival. "Do you have a place to stay?"

"You're standing in it."

"You can't remain here with my husband."

"Norman belongs to you," Ginger said, "the way Texas belongs to Spain."

"I'll help you pack," Jane said. She moved toward the untidy bedroom.

"Everything is exactly where I want it," Ginger told her, grabbing her arm.

As they came to grips, Jane's purse fell, spilling its contents across the rug. Norman managed to separate the two women. "Jane, you're out of line. In a couple of weeks, our divorce will be final."

"There's such a thing as reconciliation."

"Go back to Laceville. I'm sending you enough money so you can have a good time."

"And what are you two having? Babies?" The angry woman crawled across the bedroom carpet, sweeping things into her purse. Then she telephoned her own taxi.

On a bench in a sunny corner of the waiting room at the bus station, she tried to get a handle on the suspicion she was feeling. The woman was unlike anybody Norman had ever hung around with. She was tough and not very good-looking. She was older than

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he was and she fought like a cop. What was going on? Norman's big win, of course, would attract fortune hunters. In which case, he should be shacked up with some teenaged beauty queen, not this tough nut.

The place had been broken into. When he fobbed it off as nothing important, Norman seemed anxious to change the subject. That had been odd at the time. Now it seemed significant. Maybe Ginger Pitt was a police officer sent to investigate the burglary. Anything was possible. Jane dug through her purse looking for a comb. Everything was jumbled up after the spill. What was this business card? It must have been on the carpet and she'd picked it up by accident.

Printed on it was *Sam Acton—Antiques* and an address. Norman hated antiques. There was something scribbled on the back, not in Norman's handwriting. "$1,500. My best offer." This was probably the woman's card. The dealer was offering her a lot of money. What for?

Jane had been in and out of antique shops forever. She couldn't picture Ginger Pitt among the crystal and the Chippendale. It must be something else. Suspicion gnawed harder. The brassy woman had a hold on Norman. Jane decided she had to shake it and break it.

She stored her luggage in the checkroom. The Laceville bus wasn't due to leave for an hour and a half. Outside the station, she climbed into a taxi and gave the driver the address of Sam Acton's shop. They drove there through streets of increasingly deteriorating quality. It turned out to be in a lane near skid-row and was nothing but a pawnshop. Jane asked the driver to wait.

Inside the shop, Sam Acton came from a back room, looking at her suspiciously. When she said "Good afternoon," he went to the door, opened it, and peered along the street before coming back to her and saying, "What's up?" The booze she smelled had passed his lips very recently.

"I think we can help each other."

"Howzat?"

"Take a look." She handed him the card. He turned it over, read the reference to $1,500, and slipped it into the pocket of his flashy silk shirt.

"Anybody could have written that."

"Ginger Pitt sent me."

It was Jane's trump card, but she hadn't expected it would win a grand slam.

"Why didn't you say so?" Acton relaxed. He looked Jane up and

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down. "I like your style. You obviously fit the good neighborhoods. If you can bring in the quality stuff Ginger does, we can do business."

"Does Ginger bring in a lot?"

"Doesn't have to. She only takes valuable items from good houses. Easy for me to sell." Acton was forgetting himself. "Mind you, I take risks, too. And I have expenses. The police come in here, it costs me."

Jane bypassed the bus station, giving the driver the address of Norman's apartment. It all fell together now. Ginger Pitt was not only a home-wrecker, she was a house-breaker. She must have done the job on the apartment. Maybe Norman caught her in the act. Anyway, they were now a double. Good luck to them had it not been for the lottery win. But as things now stood, Jane wanted Ginger out and herself back in.

She laid this on the startled couple, who had been drinking chablis and playing dominos.

Ginger started laughing. "You burst in on poor old Sam? And offered yourself?"

"He formed his own conclusions. The point is, unless you vanish right now, I'll tell the police. They'll be happy to catch whoever's been busting into all these places."

"Be very careful, Jane," Norman warned. He hadn't moved from the door he had opened to her.

"I give you till Friday," Jane said.

When she was gone, Norman worried. "She has no proof. Has she?"

"No. But if the cops investigate me, it could be bad. And I don't want old Sam hassled." Ginger drew dominos from the pool. "I'll move out," she concluded. "I trust you, Norm. When the money comes, you'll send me my share."

"You're staying. There has to be another way."

"I don't see what."

"Leave it to me," he said.

Two things needed doing. Norman took care of both on a visit to Sid Hamilton's office at the ad agency. Sid turned from his typewriter, surprised to see his visitor. "Hello, stranger. What did you do to your hand?"

"Sprained my wrist." Ginger had done a good job winding the

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bandage. She believed he had really hurt himself. "I fell getting out of the tub. I need you to write a note for me." He took a sheet of agency paper from Hamilton's desk and dropped a ballpoint pen on it. "Will you write what I say? It's a reconciliation message to my wife."

Sid took dictation for the next minute and a half, covering the page with sentiments like "I've always loved you . . . We'll get together soon . . . I can't keep you out of my mind." Then Norman took away the pen and paper and signed it awkwardly near the bottom with his left hand. Then he went to his own office and found the key to Sid's apartment in his desk drawer. Sid often locked himself out when he had been drinking and he had salted the agency with spare keys so he could always find one.

Norman went in search of a shop that made keys. There was a place downstairs in the building but the man charged two dollars and Norman knew he could get it done cheaper. Five blocks away, he found an old man in a cubbyhole who cranked out a copy on a dusty machine for seventy-five cents.

Back in his office, Norman slipped Sid's original key back in the desk drawer. Then he went home.

Jane had promised to be back on Friday, tomorrow. For the plan to work, Ginger would have to be out of sight. He said to her, "Can I take you up on moving out? But only for a few days. I need space to get my head straight. Come back on Monday."

She looked into his eyes for about thirty seconds. Then she said, "I can never tell what's going on in there. But I'll see you on Monday." She threw some things into a bag and was gone.

Norman got rid of the bandage on his hand. He used a steel ruler to trim the bottom off the message Sid had written to Jane, the part with his signature. Then he scribbled the address of Sid's apartment on a notepad and set it handy, along with the copied key. There was nothing else to be done until Jane showed up.

Which she did, as predictably as the midsummer sunrise at Stonehenge. She had only one suitcase. "I didn't bring much," she said. "I plan to buy lots of new things."

"Before you do anything," Norman said, "I want you to have a final word with Ginger."

"I like 'final.' Where is she?"

"She got out, like you ordered. That business is all over. But she

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wants to talk to you about Sam Acton as soon as possible. She says it's important. Will you give her the chance?"

"I suppose. I could meet her for coffee someplace."

"Even easier—here's her address." Norman handed her the address of Hamilton's flat. "She asked if you'd mind coming there."

Jane looked at the address. "All right. I might as well get it over with. My car is in the street. I'll go there and be right back."

Norman had one more point to make. "That neighborhood isn't particularly safe." He handed her the key. "If she doesn't answer the bell, let yourself in and wait. She asked me to tell you that. In case she stepped out on an errand."

Dropping the key into her purse, Jane said, "I'll give her five minutes."

When she was gone, Norman took the folded love note and tucked it inside Jane's suitcase. There would be nobody home yet at Sid's place, it was too early. When she had no answer and unlocked the door and opened it, the paranoid copywriter's shotgun would blow her away. An investigation would show she had gone there to be with her lover—arriving, tragically, at the wrong time.

Jane parked outside the apartment building. She went to the flat entrance and rang the bell. Nobody came to the door. She rang three times more. Then she tried the key, but she couldn't make it turn. She hated keys and keys hated her. Norman would tease her unmercifully. She slipped the key in the lock once again and turned as carefully as she could. There was no movement.

"What's going on?"

The male voice behind her startled her. She turned and tried to scare the man off. "My husband will be here in a minute."

"Fine. But why are you trying to enter my flat?"

"This isn't your flat. It's Ginger Pitt's flat."

"Not this year."

Jane showed the address given her by her husband. She invoked his name. Hamilton's face became thoughtful, then hard. "You're Norman's wife? What a busy little boy."

"I don't understand."

"I'll explain. But you'd better let me open the door. Give me that key. And thank your lucky stars you couldn't turn it."

With the shotgun rendered inoperative, Hamilton sat Jane down, poured her a small whiskey, and had himself a double. They put it

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all together. "He was trying to kill you," Hamilton concluded. "The crafty bastard. I hope you take him for half his lottery money."

"He owes me more than that."

"Come with me." Hamilton went to the door. "I'm going to have a word with Norman. I'll drop you at a hotel. You don't want to see him right now."

"My car's outside. I'll check in at the Quincey." Jane was shaking. Sid supported her with an arm around her waist. "Would you get my suitcase from Norman's place and bring it there?"

"Of course I will." On the way out, Hamilton reactivated the shotgun device.

Norman poured Sid a glass of red wine from the large bottle he'd been trying to consume by himself. "You're such a cheapskate," Hamilton said. He flipped the key onto the sofa cushion. "Where did you have this made?"

"A place over in the arcade."

"Walk a mile to save a dollar. Never mind you just became a millionaire. Screwed up your murder plot because you're so stingy!"

Norman was stung. "The key is perfectly good. Jane's a klutz with keys. I should have known."

"I should bust your head! I'd be up for manslaughter if this scheme had worked!"

He refused the wine and refused to say where Jane had gone. As he picked up her suitcase, Norman was opening another liter. Sid took an audio-cassette from his pocket. *"Beethoven's Ninth,"* he said. "I bought it on my way home from work. Now I get to listen to it. You go ahead and fill yourself up with alcohol. I intend to get high on the 'Ode to Joy.' "

Alone in the apartment, Norman continued to drink. He was going to have an angry Jane to deal with. But knowing he wanted her dead might send her back to Laceville and keep her there. The impending cash payoff would dampen her rage. And Ginger would be back on Monday. She would disapprove of his scheme, so he wouldn't tell her about it. All would be as before.

Pacing, Norman picked up the key from the sofa and studied it close to a lamp, his eyes bleary. It looked perfect to him. Two dollars or two hundred, the money charged for duplicating it was irrelevant. He would show Sid Hamilton, he would win this argument.

Not trusting himself to drive, he hailed a taxi. . .

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The key would not turn.

No problem. You ease it back a smidge and try again. Get the feel of it. That was Jane's difficulty, she was tense and couldn't adapt. You had to be loose, keep working at it.

The key turned. Norman could taste the triumph. He opened the door on the darkened room. He heard the gun go off.

Sid Hamilton looked at his watch. Because Jane Harris was such good company, he had stayed longer than he intended. "I'd like to see you again," he said.

"The divorce will be final next week. We can see each other all we want." In the doorway, she said, "What if somebody should get killed someday by that gun of yours?"

"I'd need a good lawyer," he admitted.

She looked thoughtful. "Maybe Normie will fall down drunk and drown in the shower."

When he was gone, Jane opened the suitcase he had delivered. She was lifting out a sweater when she came across a folded sheet of paper. The letterhead was that of the agency where both men worked. The handwriting wasn't Norman's.

She read the romantic phrases, her heart pounding, blood infusing her cheeks. Sid must have tucked it in there so she would find it when she was alone.

In bed, falling asleep, she touched the edge of the note under her pillow. Sid was a romantic man. They would be very happy together.

The telephone rang. It was Sid. "I have good news and bad news," he said.

The expensive lawyer did a fine job. He argued that Norman Harris, knowing about the boobytrap and remorsefully drunk after failing to murder his wife, had deliberately opened Hamilton's door, thus committing suicide. The jury bought the plea and Sid went free on the manslaughter charge. He was assessed a stiff fine for guarding his apartment with a loaded shotgun but the fine would be paid by the Widow Harris.

Ginger Pitt met the happy couple outside the courtroom. "Remember me?"

"Not without anger," Jane said.

"You realize your late husband promised me a share of the lottery prize."

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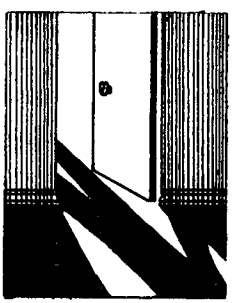
"All Normie's promises were blown away in the explosion that killed him," Jane assured her.

The media were on hand. Reporters crowded in, asking the heiress about her plans. Jane spoke with enthusiasm about becoming Mrs. Sidney Hamilton and setting up house in the quiet town from which she came.

Ginger listened. Her course was clear. She would give the wealthy newlyweds time to fill up their dwelling with expensive toys. Then she would make the drive to Laceville one quiet afternoon, bringing along an extra large satchel and her big, sharp screwdriver.



DETECTIVERSE

ROUTE OF ALL EVIL

by DOROTHY BELLE POLLACK

For money he wed, all concur.
Her fortune created a stir.
A problem now soars—
Her *dough* he adores,
But how does he get rid of *her?*

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a timely reprint by

TIM GAUTREAUX

"Just Turn Like a Gear" originally appeared in The Massachusetts Review *and was selected for the anthology* A Good Deal: Selected Short Stories from The Massachusetts Review. *Citing "Just Turn Like a Gear,"* Publishers Weekly *said: "Several of the stories from this admirable collection focus on the terrible gaps in human communication: the fierce, often thwarted desire to connect."*

The author, Tim Gautreaux, is an editor and teacher who has also published poetry and fiction in The Greensboro Review, Kansas Quarterly, *and other literary magazines . . .*

JUST TURN LIKE A GEAR

by TIM GAUTREAUX

Billy Willit hung up the wall phone in his kitchen and dropped hard into a vinyl dinette chair, spreading its chrome legs. He screwed up his face at his wife, Tilda, seated across from him at the formica table. "That was the warden. You know what I just got handed?" He pointed toward the phone over the back of his chair.

"You're back on the hoe detail," Tilda joked. "I told you not to take off so much."

"Aw, no. It's Miller Babin. Remember?"

Her pleasant expression faded. "So it's him." She placed her coffee on the formica and tilted her head. A small roller unwrapped down the left side of her hair, and she grabbed at it, winding a bleached strand around the plastic. "They've decided to electrocute him next month?"

"That's right. And I've got to find someone to do it." Billy put his hand on his round middle as though his stomach hurt. "Remember

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Farley, the old state executioner? He's in Baton Rouge for heart surgery and Marvin is scared to pull the switch." Marvin Trouple, warden of the regional penitentiary, wore tailored three-piece suits, trying to hide his weakness which the inmates could sense under the expensive cloth. The small number of prisoners who ever caught sight of him called him Marvy-Babe.

The inmates showed more respect to Billy Willit. He was a fifty-year-old executive assistant warden who started his career as a typewriter repairman in Natchez, Mississippi. He lost his first job because of his temper. One hot afternoon he was unable to get the tabs to work on a manual office model after two hours' work, so he threw it through a closed sixth-story window and watched it tumble to street level and crush in the roof of a parked sedan. The next month his brother-in-law got him a job as a tower guard at Bisley, a regional prison farm. After twenty years, he outlived enough prison officials to get to his present air-conditioned but unimportant office. The prisoners called him Blow-Up, or sometimes Fat Blow.

Tilda lit up a cigarette and blew her first lungful of smoke at the telephone. "Don't they have a standby executioner?"

"We got enough deadheads out at the farm now. Why do we need a standby person for a job we haven't done for years and years? Trouple's not sure the chair even works any more."

She tapped the edge of a purple-glass ashtray with her Lucky. "Can't you get an executioner from out of state?"

"Trouple says he's tried. None of them wants to fool with our old system. I guess they're not sure they can get a clean kill out of the machine." He wagged his head. "Hell, I don't know. I just got told to find someone to pull the switch. Trouple said he'd worry about the electronics."

"He wants a volunteer," Tilda said. "He thinks a volunteer will look better to the newspapers than a paid executioner."

Billy thought about this for a while, staring vacantly at the sugar bowl. "He worries about bad press, all right." He turned, looking through the glass of the kitchen door over to a new brick house across the street which looked exactly like his own. "Anyway, I've got to advertise, Marvin says. But how?" He scratched his bald head and ranged his grey eyes over at his wife.

She pursed her lips. "Have it run as a news item in the Pilotville paper," she said. "Last time Utah executed somebody they used local volunteers."

Her husband thought about this. He could count on Tilda for a

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clear-cut vision to the heart of any problem. He had no such decisive force and usually fretted and worried about each of his minor problems out at the prison until he lost his temper and smashed something. Sometimes his frustration at not being able to make a decision caused him to throw an inmate against a wall or into a ditch. One hot day down at the prison machine shop, unable to decide whether to junk the prison lawn tractor or to order it rebuilt, he shot the machine through the engine with a tower guard's rifle.

He stood up and kissed his wife on the neck before banging through the kitchen door on his way to Pilotville a few miles up the road. At the newspaper office he gave a statement to a reporter, who promised she would write a story which would appear the next day. He left the office relieved. He had made a decision and done something.

The next morning Billy was dimly pleased at the terse article appearing on page one of the *Pilotville Journal*. The logical thing to do after all, it seemed, was to advertise locally. His white prison sedan climbed the long low rise to gate one, a breach in miles of towering galvanized chain-link fence topped with razorlike concertina wire. After checking in with the guard, a drowsy old man nursing a Winchester pump shotgun, he drove up the asphalt a mile to his office in a squat rectangular brick building. He went in, sat down, and called Marvin Trouple to tell him what he had done.

"That's a strange way to get an executioner, don't you think?"

"It's a strange business to begin with," he retorted. "You want me to ask for resumes or something?"

"All right, don't get so damned snappy. When did you set the interviews?"

"I had the article state after lunch today, here."

"Okay. But be careful." There was a long silence after this statement as Billy tried to figure out what the warden meant. He was always saying things like, "Whatever you think is best," or "That would work all right, I guess," statements which indicated that the warden really didn't know what he was doing half the time. He often left the important decisions up to his assistants so they could be pinned for any mistakes. Billy's temper made his decisions for him, but the warden never made any decisions by himself.

"Be careful about what?" Billy asked, flushing slightly.

"You know. The press is going to cover this thing pretty close. Pick somebody that doesn't look crazy. Somebody with, uh, with—"

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"Class?" Billy said, wincing.

"Yeah. That's right. Class. I guess. Give me a call when you get someone. Babin is scheduled for March seventeen at dawn."

Billy hung up and loosened his tie. Although it was a chilly day, he felt hot, and he walked over to the radiator by the window, turning the valve to shut off the steam. He threw up the window and looked over the grassy grounds of the office compound to a stand of grey hardwoods, huge pin oaks about two hundred yards distant. One oak inside the wire fence, twice as large as the rest, stood out from the ranks, its empty branches soaring into a milky sky. In the many idle hours his job afforded him, Billy had studied this one tree as if it were a statement of nature, a decision the forest had made for the groundskeeper. The tree had begun to die about three years before. The grey bark was splotched with orange mold and a white, scalloped fungus burst through the dead skin of several upper branches. Turning away, he went to his desk where a pile of federal forms awaited him. He dawdled over them until noon, carefully filling them out in longhand, grateful that they wouldn't allow him to think about the afternoon. When the hoarse whistle roared from the sugar mill across the rich alluvial soil of the farm, he left for the cafeteria.

The building where the employees ate was a one-story brick slab a few hundred feet from Billy's office. Already the tower guards were lining up their trays on the railings, talking to the few white-collar employees who came in early. The clerks and supervisors were never as hungry as the guards, who stacked their trays with extra drinks, extra salads, and double helpings of meat. Taking a ham sandwich and a glass of milk, Billy sat down next to a window. Cyrus Ditts, a horseback guard who watched over prisoners working the soybeans, sat with him, his tray overflowing. He put his straw cowboy hat between them on the table.

"I saw the paper," Cyrus said, squinting a red-veined eye as he squeezed his lemon into one of his glasses of tea. "It's a shame when you got to go outside to get someone like that."

"Marvin said nobody here'll do the job," Billy responded, a hint of accusation lingering around the edges of his voice. "Not even Black Raoul."

"Black Raoul is one of us," the horseback guard said, carefully buttering his cornbread. "He'll call us to shoot a man going over the fence because he knows that man knows that's how it is. That's the

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rules." Black Raoul was a long-time trusty guard of the death-house exercise yard.

"Babin broke the rules," Billy said, looking through the foggy windows at his oak. "What's the difference?"

"Ain't the same." Cyrus ran his right hand through his greasy black hair to sweep it out of his weathered face, the face of an Indian, the face, Billy thought, imagined by boys out of the side of a mountain. "Babin'll be sitting still when he gets it. It's kind of religious. If you're struck dead in the middle of sinning, you go straight to hell. But if you're struck dead after a while, when you're just walking along the road or fixing a broke water pipe, nobody knows."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Billy tucked the last piece of sandwich into his mouth and stared at Cyrus, waiting for an explanation. The guard was a man who, if you stared at him long enough, would keep talking, as though to be looked at was to be questioned.

"It's kind of a code. I'd shoot Babin in the head if he tried to go over my fence. But not if I found him in my shack on the other side watching my portable TV." Cyrus rolled his veined eyes at Billy as he popped a forkful of hamburger steak into his mouth.

"You don't think he ought to fry?"

"I somehow think he ought to. None of us can forget those babies, none of us who read the paper. But I won't do it. Don't ask me why not."

"I'm fixing to meet some people who will, if anyone shows up," Billy said, wiping his big mouth and getting up slowly.

Five minutes later he was seated at his desk, and there was a knock at the door. He got up, letting in a small man dressed in khaki pants burned through in several places by either cigarettes or welding. His shirt was a washed-out cotton rag covered by either stains or faded design.

"'Lo," the man said. "Name Earnest Quartenberry. Someone told me about the paper." His eyes were tiny and very far apart. His hair was grey, combed straight back from a sloping, sun-blistered forehead.

"Have a seat there." Billy sat down and immediately remembered Warden Trouple's "Be careful."

"This feller you burning a nigger?" Quartenberry sat hunched over with his hands pressed palms together, pointed down. He asked the question as though he were asking the time.

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"No. He's a white boy."

"Who'd he kill?"

"Five children," Billy said, feeling that he was wasting his time. "White," he added quickly.

"Well, sir, I'll throw the juice to him awright, if that's what you want. Things won't straighten up in this state unless we start hangin' and fryin' again." The man's eyes, which seemed weak at first, took on a certain power as he spoke, as though he convinced himself of something as he spoke it. They were the eyes of a crazy man, Billy thought. He imagined the reporters photographing Earnest Quartenberry at the switch, imagined what the liberal press would do to the prison administration, imagined Marvin Trouple in his blue three-piece suit crying like a baby as he prepared to meet the governor.

"I tell you what, Earnest. Just give me your number where I can get in touch with you and I'll give you a call if we need you." He turned a pad around and pointed it at the other man, who sat slumped into an S shape staring at him with sudden suspicion.

"I don't use no phone," he said, waving a skinny hand studded with greasy fingernails at the pad.

Billy turned the pad around again and prepared to write. Maybe the man couldn't. "Then give me your mailing address."

Quartenberry leaned back and stared at the wall above Billy's head. "Don't take no mail," he said. "I'll tell you where to fine me, though."

"That's good."

"You know Mr. Ellis McFarland's property?"

"Yes."

"The road that goes straight back two mile to the levee? You get on that road and go to the tractor shed don't nobody use no more. In back that they's a cane truck on its side. In back that they's a tool shed don't have no windows. I stay there."

"Okay," Billy sang. "When we need you we'll send out a car." He stood up.

"Better send a truck. Can't a car get back where I'm at," he said, sliding out of the chair.

When Quartenberry got into the hall, Billy saw another man rise from a folding chair and stride toward him. This is going to be a long day, he thought. The other followed him into his office and sat down without being asked to. He was a tall, well built man who didn't take off his cowboy hat or his mirror sunglasses even though

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the old office, cheaply paneled in dark imitation wood, was as dim as a tunnel. He wore a woolly jacket, bluejeans, and black western boots. He seemed to be about thirty-five. "I hear you want that murdering son-of-a-bitch to scream," he began.

"We need an executioner, Mr.—?"

"Sallet," he said. "Lacy Sallet."

"Are you related to or have you known any of the victims of this man?" Billy began to pull a form out of his desk drawer.

"All men are related someway, mister. Except for Babin, who ain't related to nothing."

Billy stared at him and made a face. He hadn't counted on a philosopher showing up in this part of the state.

"I mean, I ain't adverse to killing the bastard at all. I was in Nam. I killed every day God sent, so I know how to do it." Sallet stuck his legs straight out in front of him and folded his hands over his belly. It was impossible for Billy to see his eyes. He didn't know why people wore those glasses; as a matter of fact, it made him angry to have someone in his office staring at him at such an advantage.

"Why don't you take off your glasses?" Billy said, a slight edge in his voice.

"Don't see why I have to," Sallet snapped.

"Look, stud, you got any eyeballs behind there?" Nobody could outsnap Billy Blow-Up.

The cowboy peeled off his glasses and showed a pair of surprised, ordinary eyes. He looked like any of the local young farmers, almost normal.

"Just write your number on that pad," Billy said. "If we need you, will you be around on the seventeenth of next month?"

"Sure will," Sallet answered, standing up and sidling toward the door, all his power stripped with his sunglasses. He wrote on the pad as he moved.

"You got a suit?" Billy asked as an afterthought.

"A suit?"

"Yes. A suit. This is a pretty sober occasion."

The cowboy thought for a while and handed back the pad. "Will Babin have to wear one?"

Billy let out a long sigh. "No."

"Then why—?"

"Thank you. We'll call you if we need you."

The next man he interviewed was Horace Clemmons, a bank officer at the local savings and loan. As the old man sat down in the

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office, Billy looked him over and thought how pleased Trouple would be. Clemmons wore a three-piece suit, his grey hair was neatly combed, his Florsheims gleamed, and in his face was an aura of upper-middle-class composure. People would see his picture in the paper and know that the man who pulled the switch on Miller Babin was a gentleman. Billy knew Clemmons personally. He knew him as a life-long resident of Pilotville, as a run-of-the-mill Presbyterian, a Rotarian, a veteran. There was nothing the press could do with him.

"Horace, I'm kind of curious about why you're volunteering for this job," Billy said, settling into his padded office chair.

Clemmons looked down at the tile floor as though the question embarrassed him. "I'm not sure that I know myself. I'm afraid that Babin will get out someday, I guess. Somebody might lose another child. I don't know." He got up and walked to the window, looking out to the woods. "I think about him when I look at my grandchildren."

"Do you know the families of anybody he hurt?"

"No. I guess you think it's crazy to want to kill someone without a personal reason." Clemmons' grey eyes seemed to focus on something out on the grounds.

"Some people might say you're brave. If you can spare the time next month on the seventeenth, I think you might be our man. I can't tell you for sure right now because I have to interview the rest of the folks that show up today."

"I won't be sorry if you find somebody else." Clemmons kept looking out to the woods as though something was bothering him there. Billy walked up next to him and followed his gaze.

"It's dying," Billy said after a minute.

"Such a big tree. So symmetrical and heavy of limb. I don't see a lightning strike."

"It's not lightning. It's not disease. No one knows what went wrong with it. Black Raoul says a tree is just like a man. It can't live forever."

Clemmons looked away from the tree. "Black Raoul the murderer?"

Billy stared. "He's a trusty in DR."

"Yes." Clemmons turned and walked slowly toward the door. He was a man who knew when business was finished. He didn't have to be told to leave.

"I'll call you," Billy said.

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"I hope you don't have to," the old man answered, pulling the office door shut.

That afternoon, the interviews continued. There was Lloyd Buntin, a pest-control man from St. Francisville, Wilfred Boineaux, a garage mechanic who wanted the job seemingly because he was bored, Alexis McCrory, a black undertaker who wanted two jobs, and Xavier Guz, a simple, red-faced man who relished the chance of killing someone.

Billy usually left the office at four, and at a quarter to four, when he saw no one waiting in the hall, he began to clear off his desk. There was a knock at the door and he grimaced, imagining another sour volunteer intent on wasting his time. "Come in," he moaned, pausing with a handful of papers in mid-air. A woman, perhaps forty-five, dressed in a navy-blue skirt and jacket over a white blouse, walked in and stood in front of the desk, waiting to be asked to sit down. As Billy looked at her, he worried that she might be from the parole board.

"I read your statement in the paper," she said.

Billy was suddenly rattled. "Sit down." He wondered what Trouple would think. She was slim, about five-and-a-half feet tall, and looked like a librarian, a graceful, pretty librarian. "You mean you're here about the execution?"

"Yes," she said, crossing her legs in a slow, smooth motion, the way a polished woman does, showing nothing to a man looking at her head-on. "I'd like to volunteer."

"Is there any special reason you'd like to do this?" He read in her ordinary brown eyes an unease which might signal that she was hiding something. He wasn't good at spotting hidden things in women. This he knew from twenty-three years of living with Tilda, who behaved stupidly at all times except when it mattered that she did not.

"I feel that Mr. Babin would be better off someplace else."

"I see," he said, puzzled at the spirituality of the statement. "You don't know any of the families of the victims, I guess."

"No." She shook her head gravely, folding her hands over her knees. "Do you really want a reason or are you merely trying to find out if I have a grudge that the press can exploit?"

He shook his head. He had underestimated another woman. "It's just that we need a responsible person to do this for the state, someone not, uh—"

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"Crazy?"

He turned in his chair and looked out the window at the lengthening shadows on the lawn spreading from his oak. If she was going to finish his sentences, she could invent her own questions. After a moment's silence, she cleared her throat. He didn't turn around.

"What are you staring at?" she asked.

"That big oak. I've stared at it for so many years I feel it belongs to me."

For a long time she looked past him through the window. "It is an impressive tree."

"Yep. It's some tree all right."

She let out a pent-up breath. "I want to do it because it needs to be done, Mr. Willit. I don't have young children, so it's not a protection motive. I'm not militant about anything. I'm just a schoolteacher from Pilotville who wants to do something definite, something to put things in order. Mr. Babin will never be eliminated if he lives past his execution date."

"That's for sure. His lawyers will invent a case for a new trial in two months for some reason or another." He turned to look at her again. "What does your husband think about this?"

"My husband died five years ago. And I don't care what my children think. The youngest is twenty and beyond my influence."

He thought of his own twenty-year-old son presently in the woods east of Vicksburg at a four-wheeler mud rally. His twenty-five-year-old son had recently quit his job at the power company to open a head shop in Shreveport. "I see," he said in an understanding tone.

He interviewed Evelyn Wright for half an hour. She told him that she had taught math four miles away in Pilotville for twenty-four years. She was not depressed, not on drugs, did not owe a large sum of money, was not ill, did not have a depraved family. There was a subtle irony bordering on the dark side of humor in many of her statements about her career and life in Pilotville. Billy looked at her smooth skin and dark, silver-veined curls and could detect no sign of anything the press could seize and exploit. There was no fire in her eyes as there was in Earnest Quartenberry's murderous balls. He wondered what the warden would think of her. Then he thought of Horace Clemmons. The uneasy realization that he would have to make a decision filtered down on Billy's balky mind.

He thanked the woman for the visit, jotted her address and phone number, and followed her into the parking lot. He wanted to see her car. She walked over to a four-door Oldsmobile, started it, and drove

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off in an ordinary manner, doing nothing to indicate that she was crazy, and Billy nodded to himself. He went inside and called the principal of Pilotville High School, who told him that Mrs. Wright was indeed an ordinary teacher, a woman who did her job loyally.

"But would you say she had any what you might call idiosyncrasies?" Billy liked the word and was finally talking to someone who would not find it odd.

"No," the principal said. "She seems a bit bored lately. In the past two years, I mean."

"Nothing else?"

"No, Mr. Willit. She's a good teacher."

He drove home to Tilda feeling satisfied. But that night he woke up on his coil-suspension mattress next to his delicately snoring wife. He lay on his back and folded his hands behind his head, staring at the sheetrock ceiling in the glow filtering in through the curtains from the streetlight. He thought how sheetrock was a thin covering of the bones of the house, the ugly studs, pipes, and wires. It was like Evelyn Wright's face, giving no hint of what was underneath.

He thought of Horace Clemmons, wondering if he should tap him for the job of executioner. The fact that Clemmons was a man comforted him because Billy understood men more than he did women. He felt a bit guilty about questioning the woman's motives more than he questioned those of the men. Was it because killing was more of a man's job?

The thought caused him to sit up in bed and stare through the sheers into the lawns of the subdivision. He had come across many women during his experience in the prison system who had killed, and he attempted to assemble a representative catalogue to prove something to himself. He thought of five women quickly, all convicted of knife murders, crimes of passion. Three more came to mind who had done in their boy friends with guns. There was Martina in the women's division across the river who had backed over her husband with the family station wagon immediately after he had told her he was leaving for good. Woman after woman came to Billy in the dark, and they were all guilty of killing by passion, in the heat of the moment's passion. He could think of only three who had planned the murders they were involved in, and they were sent up with male accomplices.

It seemed that unless a woman became angry, and damned angry at that, she was unlikely to take a life. In contrast, Billy could think

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of dozens of male killers, nearly everyone in Black Raoul's exercise yard, who had planned their crimes or who had not been particularly excited when they had carried them out. He thought of Willie Sid, an accountant who had arrived at a used-car lot to do the place's books and who shot the manager, took his keys, and started up several cars before he found one he liked the sound of, driving off to Florida.

He rolled over against Tilda and tried not to think. Soon he was asleep, her hard body working a charm on him.

The next morning he was a flurry of indecision, totally ambivalent about the choice between Horace and the Wright woman. He told everything to Tilda over his third cup of coffee, even about his nighttime list of women murderers. She sniffed like a horse. Even though she was not coarse, but in fact fine-looking for a tall, middle-aged woman, Tilda carried the womanly traits of the community: she cursed, suffered from sinus, and burned holes in everything with her cigarettes.

"You're right," she said, sitting down across from him at the breakfast table and crossing her legs smoothly but with some difficulty, rocking on her round bottom to give momentum to the act of hoisting her right leg over her left. "When you boys look at one of those bad ones out at the farm, all you see is a son-of-a-bitch. When a woman looks at a son-of-a-bitch, she sees him for what he is, all right, but then she sees him as somebody's boy, somebody's baby a long time ago." She took a drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke between Billy and the door. "I don't know, Billy. A lot of women just worry more about bringing sons-of-bitches into the world than they do about taking them out."

He looked more perplexed. "She worries me, but she sure would make good press. When those liberal-paper boys get through with her, somebody'll be after her to do lady cigarette commercials in magazines."

"Go over to Pilotville and talk to her after work." Tilda said this in a quiet voice, as though she might have wanted Billy to think he was hearing his own thoughts.

"Hold supper for me."

Cyrus Ditts, the horseback guard who often ate lunch with Billy, was waiting for him when he walked into his office.

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"What can I do for you, Cy?" Billy asked, falling into his desk chair.

"Kiddie Day," he said.

"Oh my God." Kiddie Day was a quarterly event. The youngest offenders from the state's city slums were brought in every three months for a tour of the prison. "I'd forgotten."

He walked over to a metal file cabinet and from the top drawer retrieved his large-billed cap, which had the word *Bisley* spelled threateningly across its white crown. He followed Cyrus, who was holding his Winchester pump in his right hand, and together they walked across the compound to the visitors' parking area. They came to a blue school bus in which thirty pairs of eyes looked warily out at the drab buildings and miles of galvanized wire. Cyrus nodded to the driver, who told everyone to file out and stand alongside the bus. Thirty young boys between eleven and fourteen came out into the sunshine. This part of the event, the filing off the bus, was something Billy never got used to. He was always struck with the young faces of the offenders. He assumed some link between innocence and youth, and here in the dowdy lineup was a contradiction he never could understand. One short black youth looked like a baby, his short curls shining as though his mother had just lifted him from the bathtub.

It was Billy's job to greet the bus and to tell the children what they would do before being brought back to their city. He gave his spiel, told them what cell blocks they would go through, told them that they would go out in the field in the hot sun to see what the work was like for a prisoner. When he finished, he asked if there were any questions. A tall boy whose jeans were three inches above his ankles said, "Yeah, man." Billy nodded at him.

"We gonna see the 'lectric chair, man?"

Billy wondered if anyone had ever shown Miller Babin an electric chair when he had been a boy. He wondered if it would have made any difference. The chair was part of the tour they saved for the older delinquents. "Why do you want to see that?"

The boy shrugged his thin shoulders. "I just wants to, you know?"

Billy nodded to Cyrus. "Throw it in the tour. Let him sit in it if he wants to and pray that that's the last time he'll sit in it." Everybody stirred uneasily when he said that, even Cyrus, who shifted his shotgun from one hand to the other.

"Any other questions?" Billy saw a small black hand rise above the head of the smallest boy. He had the face of a cherub. "Yes?"

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"We going by cell block O?" he asked.

"No. Why?" Block O was a minimum-security area to the north of the farm.

"That's where my daddy be," he said. "I thought maybe I can see him."

"No," he said again, looking over the top of the bus as though the answer cost him nothing.

"Oh." The boy looked sideways, sticking his hands into his pockets.

Another little boy, with a mouthful of crooked teeth and a shock of uncombed blond hair, asked a question. "Someone tried to run out this place, will you kill him with that gun there?"

"That's the rules," Cyrus drawled, narrowing his red eyes at the youth.

"Would you kill a convick just for fun?"

"No, boy. What kind of question is that? It's them that kills for fun what we got locked up here. Somebody's got to be on the fence before I shoot him." The old horseback guard was flustered. He turned away and faced cell block A, their first stop.

"All right," Billy announced. "Move them along. Come lunchtime, let them eat under the sick oak." He went back to his office and sat in his chair looking over the lawn at the dying tree. Its branches were puffy in places, and when he looked close he saw raw spots where pieces of bark had fallen away. Last spring the leaves had been thin and uneven, the color too yellow. He wondered if the tree would become dangerous, if the big limbs would fall off.

He knew he must decide who the executioner would be as soon as possible. Staring out the window was doing him no good, and in desperation he called Warden Trouple's number.

He quickly explained his problem. Trouple insulted him, told him that he shouldn't be afraid of a woman, that she would be a good choice, he guessed. Billy countered with the attributes of Horace Clemmons and Trouple grew abusive, asking him what he was requesting his opinion for if he wasn't going to make use of it. The conversation degenerated quickly until Billy grew so angry that he was yelling into the receiver. "Okay, boy, I don't need no damned advice from you. I'll just go ahead and pick somebody and you'll see them March seventeenth for the first time!"

Marvin Trouple said something nasty about going to work for Smith-Corona again and Billy slammed the receiver down so hard that it bounced onto the desk. He mashed the button with his thumb to kill Trouple's whining and then dialed a number written on a pad

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next to the phone. He spoke with the secretary at Pilotville High School, got the woman's schedule, and then walked out into the oily parking lot to find one of the farm's official cars.

The high school was a modern one-story brick-and-tile building, a labyrinth of halls and classrooms. At five to twelve he finally located her room and took off his hat, leaning against the wall to wait for the end of class. He could hear her lecturing inside, a steady, professional voice, the voice of someone who knew her subject almost too well, the voice of a recording. The classroom had two doors, one at the head of the class, one at the rear. Looking through a glass slot cut vertically in the rear door, he saw several students who were either asleep or gazing out onto the playground. Two were carrying on a subdued conversation, and two others were drawing in their notebooks. He couldn't quite see Evelyn Wright but could hear her trying to teach the class about quadratic equations. For five minutes he listened and understood, the old facts coming back to him like unimportant memories. The bell down the hall rattled alive, and the somnolent class jumped to life and began to file through the door, bumping past him into the uncomplicated air of the corridor. When the class was nearly empty, he walked in. She saw him and didn't change her expression.

"What brings you up here, Mr. Willit?"

"Hello. I'd just like to talk some more about our meeting the other day." Standing before her desk, he felt suddenly subordinate. He folded his hands before him. "Is there a place around here where we could have lunch?"

"I'm afraid not. I have a sandwich waiting for me in the teacher's lounge, but the place is crowded now. No place to talk." She stepped from behind her desk and sat down in one of the metal-and-formica student desks, her stockings whispering as she crossed her legs. He sat next to her.

"I guess I just wanted to make sure that you wanted to do this," he began. "It happens at dawn on March seventeen."

"I'll be there. Do you want me to come to your office?"

"I'm afraid it'll be early. About five or a little before."

"Okay," she said. "Now I suppose you want to know why I want to do it?" She looked at him almost viciously, as though baiting him for a fight.

"No, lady. I just wanted to be sure you'll show up." He forced a

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smile that wrinkled his bald forehead. He began to play with his hat like a cowboy. Tilda often said he looked like Gene Autry.

She looked away, and in an instant her eyes misted over. "You're lying. You want to know, don't you? You can't fool me. What person in his right mind wouldn't be curious?"

He began to feel queasy and foolish, as though he had bought something and realized suddenly that he had paid too much for it. Pulling out his handkerchief, he wiped his forehead.

She looked at him closely. "Don't let me upset you."

"Upset me?"

"My husband used to wipe his face with a handkerchief when we would begin discussions." Outside the window two boys passed, bragging about their video-game scores.

"Aw, it's just hot, that's all." He looked down at the floor tiles, feeling a fear mount inside. He wondered where the conversation was leading.

"I'm a very private person, Mr. Willit. I don't like to define my reasons for doing things." She stopped and looked away, seeming to try to get control of her feelings, momently biting her lip, raising her eyebrows. "Just don't worry about me."

"That's the advice my wife gives me."

She looked at him with new interest. "Is your wife still with you?"

"Oh, yeah. She's just a big country girl, but we get along real good."

"I hope you never lose her, then." She ran her fingers through her dark hair as though she had to touch herself to prove she was real. "My husband and I were very compatible. After he died, I tried to rely on my children." She stopped speaking abruptly and threw her gaze out over the playground as though to visualize her children years before in the tumult of play. Her look became an expression of longing, and Billy saw her right hand open and close in a gesture that had meaning only for her.

"Look," he began, "you don't have to tell me anything. I just don't want you to let yourself in for something you really don't want to do. I've got half a dozen fellows on a string that want to pull the switch."

She almost smiled at him. "Is it really a switch or do they just say that?" Her eyes fastened on his own.

"Yes'm. A double knife blade."

"You mean like in the old Frankenstein movies?"

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"An electrician will set everything up and he'll show you what to do."

She sat up stiffly and uncrossed her legs. "I'll be there on time."

Billy let out a breath noisily. "I'm glad. I just wanted to make sure how you felt about this."

Evelyn Wright ran her eyes over him, his large bald head, his sloping wrestler's shoulders that she knew were all fat. Reaching out, she gave him a playful slap on the arm. "Don't worry, Mr. Willit. Whatever my reasons, I'll show up."

He didn't change his expression when she touched him. People in this part of the state were fond of slapping each other affectionately. He stood, taking her hand as she offered it, helping her out of the cramped desk. "I don't want to take up your lunch hour."

"It doesn't take me long to eat." She gathered up her books and notes from the wooden desk.

"I'll be going now. I'll call you the day before the seventeenth."

"That's fine," she said, putting her right hand into a pocket of her blue skirt and pulling out a tissue to wipe her nose.

"Maybe you can come over and have dinner with Tilda and me after this thing's over."

"What a strange request. Dinner with the executioner." She laughed.

He gave her a worried smile and walked with her down the hall to the teachers' lounge. There, she touched his arm and several teachers looked up at him, causing him to flush like a teenager. He started to say something to her but they were both distracted by a class of first graders marching past their legs, going to the cafeteria. When the woman saw the flock of bright faces, her expression froze into a poisonous frown.

"Miller Babin," she said to herself. "Would he like to be here?"

Billy nodded slowly, wiping his forehead again. "Five of them together in the same room." He stared at the children in disbelief, having forgotten how small and fine-featured first graders were, having forgotten what Babin had done. "What are they doing at a high school?"

"Field trip," she said, folding her arms and leaning against the wall. "First graders go everywhere in town. The railroad station. The phone company. They just follow where their teacher leads without a thought. They never have to make a decision."

"That must be nice," he said longingly, looking after the line of

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children as it wove down the hall and out of the building into the sunshine.

That night at supper Tilda asked him how his interview had gone.

"Oh, all right, I guess." He was feeling fine. He shoveled at a plate of sliced ham, greens, potatoes, and string beans. "She turned out to be a pretty agreeable girl, after all. She's sure she wants to do it, anyway. She slapped my arm real hard."

Tilda didn't miss a chew. "Those Pilotville women like to think they're more polished than most, but they're pretty mean, deep down."

The night before the execution, Billy couldn't sleep. He lay in bed and watched the ceiling, wondering if he was doing something wrong. He questioned whether finding an executioner was as bad as pulling the switch himself. Getting up at two o'clock, he wandered into the kitchen and stared into the refrigerator. Deciding that a beer would calm his nerves, he grabbed a can of the sale brand Tilda had brought home from the one-stop. He put a forefinger through the little aluminum ring and it broke off the tab without opening the can.

He stared at the metal circle in disbelief. He rummaged through the hill of utensils in the kitchen drawer for three minutes before he found a rusty beer opener. The tool would not grab the rim on the top of the can, and there was no rim on the bottom. He turned the can around four or five times in the dim light of the refrigerator and, torn between putting the can back and stabbing it with a fork, he made a roundhouse swing and slammed it onto the kitchen floor. It skittered across the tile and banged into the wall. It was deformed, but unopened. Tilda appeared, leaning on the doorjamb. "Get dressed and go out there," she said.

"Til, my stomach hurts so bad." He backed up against the counter, his hands folded over his belly.

"It'll all be over in four hours. Four hours won't kill you. Not you."

He couldn't see her in the dark kitchen, but he could feel her presence give him strength as though some intangible power passed between them. "I'm just wondering if what I'm doing is right," he said. "What do you think, Til?"

From behind her an orange star appeared as she swung a cigarette up to take a drag. "Who do you think I am? God? If you didn't go there today, they'd still do it. You're just a little gear in the machine, and if you don't turn with the big wheels Trouple will strip you

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clean. Think about Babin. There are as many reasons to do it as not."

She walked over to him and rubbed his bald head, finding it in the dark like a doorknob in a familiar house. "Honey, are we smart enough to figure out the best set of reasons? We could think and fret the rest of our lives and then never be sure the decision we made was the right one." She took a long, painful drag on her cigarette. "Just turn like a gear. A gear don't know where the power comes from. It just turns because of it."

He relaxed under Tilda's cool, soft hand like a curled-up morning newspaper. "Where's my blue suit?" he asked, squeezing her behind.

Death Row was a stone building of three stories built in 1883 and topped with countless spirals of Viet Nam-era concertina wire. At five-thirty, two news artists, a photographer, three reporters, Marvin Trouple, Black Raoul, a priest, and three guards waited at the gate to the Death Row exercise yard, all watching Billy and Evelyn Wright walk across the grass toward them. Only two reporters were to be allowed at first, but Trouple was so pleased with the idea of a woman executioner that he permitted one more. The photographer snapped his picture and Trouple smiled broadly, adjusting the lapels on his immaculate brown suit, checking his silk tie. As Evelyn Wright approached, introductions were made to the amazed pressmen, and photographs were taken of the woman from several angles.

"Remember, boys," Trouple said expansively, "no pictures once we're inside for the, ah, event."

Billy nodded to Black Raoul only. "What you doing here?"

" 'Lectrician wouldn't work on the panel, so they got me to check it out. Make sure it work right." When he grinned, four gold teeth shone in the mercury-vapor lights of the exercise yard. In the centers were white stars.

"That's right. You were a licensed electrician," Billy said.

"Twenny years ago. Senior trusty got to go, anyway," Black Raoul said.

Billy looked up at him as they walked side by side. "Are you the senior or just the biggest and the blackest?"

Black Raoul showed his stars. "I be the oldes' and the stronges', Fat Blow."

"Take the lead," Trouple commanded, falling in behind the big trusty. The woman walked ahead of Billy and the reporters and guards came last.

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They went through an iron-mesh door, up a sour-smelling stairwell to the third floor. There they passed through a double-locked set of barred gates, down a cell block for two hundred feet to a steel wall. Black Raoul produced a small key and opened an ordinary steel door distinguished only by thousands of smudges and scratches covering its tan paint. Through this door was a short hall, three cells on the left, a wooden wall with a black door in its center to the right. The group marched quietly down to the last cell and looked in on Miller Babin, who was sitting on his cot masturbating.

"Aw, shit," he said as the group gathered quietly outside his door. He danced around his cell, jerking up his pants, trying to keep his back to them, fussing with his fly.

Trouple blushed and turned to Evelyn Wright to apologize, but she stared at him, not seeming to know what he was talking about. Billy went into the cell behind Black Raoul and checked to see that Babin had been shaved properly. "You want to see the priest?" he asked.

"Naw. He can kiss my ass. I can't believe you're really gonna do this to me. What did I ever do to you people?" He began to cry, and Trouple motioned for two big guards to grab him and pull him into the hall. When they dragged Babin whimpering past the woman, she began to get wild-eyed.

"Easy," Billy said, squeezing her arm. "Easy. It'll be over in a few minutes."

"He's so short. His nose is big," she said in a subdued falsetto.

Miller Babin began to scream as they tried to shove him through the black door. He caught his feet in the door frame, and it took Black Raoul and both guards to force him through. Once inside, Billy held onto the woman as though she were a talisman. The reporters were told to line the wall on the right, twenty-five feet from the chair, which was on the opposite wall. To the left was an electrical panel eight feet high with controls on the side away from the chair. The panel, which had a small window in its middle, was turned slightly toward the reporters.

Black Raoul tended to the controls as the guards fought with Babin. He bit one on the neck and the injured man fell back howling, but the other one slammed his shoulder into the shaved man and thrust him into the seat. Another guard locked the electrode clamps around his ankles while the biggest guard, sweating and cursing, sat on Babin and locked in his arms. When they finished, they backed

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off and looked at him. The smallest guard, blood streaming down his back, lowered the head electrode onto Babin's slick scalp.

Trouple glided around the room like a butterfly. His shoes were noisy and he was smiling too much. "How's the panel, Raoul?" he asked.

The black man raised a huge, scarred arm and flicked two switches which started the generators—old, black, heavily wound motors which spun quietly, giving off a mild scent of ozone. He adjusted two sets of rheostats and frowned. "This old thing ain't been used in sixteen years. The amps is wrong."

"It checked out yesterday," Trouple said, a whine in his voice. "Can we still use it?"

"I can't believe it!" Babin began screaming. He cursed everyone in the room.

"Sure," Black Raoul said, glaring at the man in the chair through the tinted window of the control panel.

Billy shook his head, thinking of the power of words, how Babin was a doomed man long before he had killed anybody.

Trouple peered at the amperage gauge, which fluctuated wildly for a few moments but then calmed down and rested close to the required level. He looked at his watch, then the reporters, then Evelyn Wright. "It's time," he said to her.

She now clung to Billy, her eyes on Babin, who writhed and cursed in the chair. Billy knew he would have to lead her over to the panel, but he hesitated. He felt that he was betraying her, sending her out to do something awful that she didn't really have to do. He forced himself to move toward the control panel. Be like a gear. Just turn like a gear. He pushed and she walked slowly over to the controls. Trouple showed her the double-blade knife switch that she had to push, one time for twenty seconds, disconnect, and then again for ten seconds.

When Babin saw her walk toward the controls, he stopped struggling. "You mean a bitch is gonna do it? What you got against me, lady? Why ain't you home looking after your kids, huh, momma? I can't believe this!" he shrieked. She looked at the black bakelite handle of the switch and then at Miller Babin. Tears began to roll from her eyes. She grabbed the handle and looked over at Billy, who was biting his lip. She opened her mouth. "I can't do it," she sobbed.

Trouple stood next to her, behind the panel out of sight of the reporters. "Now just push it to," he coaxed.

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"You do it," she said. "I tried, but I can't." She placed a hand over her mouth.

Trouple stalked over to Billy and said something through his teeth. The two of them walked back to the panel where she was sitting on a stool Black Raoul had provided. "Evelyn," Billy said. "Are you going to go through with it?"

She shook her head slowly, crying into her hands. "I thought I could. I don't know what's wrong. He's horrible."

Billy looked over at the reporters, who were busily drawing and writing. "Raoul?"

"No, man. I won't," he said, squinting at the voltmeter.

Trouple looked like a man whose ship was sinking. "I'll have your desk for this," he said. "You'll be back in a tower with a rusty carbine when I get finished with you. Sunshine and mosquitoes, you like that?" He kept his voice low enough so he would not be heard by the reporters, who were absorbed with Babin.

"What do you want from me?" Billy asked, flushing. "I sweated blood over this choice. You think I just went out in the street and grabbed the first person I saw?"

"I should have known to trust a dummy with this job. A typewriter repairman. It takes someone with good sense to choose an executioner. What do you think those press boys are going to say about this if we don't go through with it? Talk to her!"

Billy squatted, looking at the woman, and when their eyes met, she shook her head in a delicate, pleading fashion, the way only a woman can.

"One of you screws cut me loose!" Babin yelled. He couldn't see the woman, and like the reporters had no idea of the conflict going on behind the panel.

"Please," Trouple said, getting down on one knee and grabbing the woman's hands. Again, she shook her head. The warden stood up. "You really screwed my life up," he said. "This'll cause me months of paperwork. Do you know how many legislators are on my ass?"

Still squatting, Billy leaned around the panel to look at Miller Babin. The prisoner uttered a curse that made even the big prison guards look at each other in astonishment.

"Talk to me," Billy said.

Babin screamed something that made Evelyn Wright move her hands to her ears. Black Raoul stuck a long screwdriver into an open

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panel on the control cabinet to adjust a rheostat. The amperage needle wavered like a reed in the wind.

"Talk to me."

"Let me go! Let me go, you fat maggot!"

Billy jumped up to say or do something, he didn't know what. He bumped Black Raoul's arm and the trusty dropped his screwdriver into the cabinet. The two men looked after the tool as it fell into the mechanism and lodged between two copper brackets, producing a small blue spark as it did. In thirty seconds they had fished out the screwdriver, using two long pairs of insulated pliers. Billy looked up through the tinted glass and found that Babin was dead.

The reporters began scribbling more furiously as the physician walked forward to check for a pulse. They were unaware that Babin's death was an accident. The doctor nodded to Trouple and the warden smiled. Two guards winced as they touched Babin's hot body to unbuckle him. It seemed that everybody wanted to leave at once, to get through the black door. Billy held Evelyn Wright from behind by her upper arms, keeping between her and the reporters, even nudging a couple away when they tried to ask questions.

Black Raoul left the group at the third-floor gate, turning back to help the guards with Babin, and Billy made sure the reporters were escorted down two landings before he followed. The priest left at the first-floor entrance, turning silently into the first-floor cells, asking the double-lock guard for permission to give visitations. The reporters, curiously quiet, escaped the exercise yard, running for their cars. Marvin Trouple, casting Billy a grudging smile, stalked off toward his office. Evelyn and Billy walked across the lawn under a new copper sun.

"I am so sorry," she said, leaning heavily on him. "I am so sorry."

"Don't fret about it," he said dully, looking over the lawn for something.

"But you killed a man and you didn't want to do it," she sobbed, realizing the enormity of what had happened. "You killed for me."

"Aw, don't say that. It was kind of an accident. *You* saw." He was perspiring heavily, even though the air was cool. Stripping his pretty blue coat, he slung it over his shoulder.

"That's how it always is," she said. "Men killing for women." She disengaged her arm from his and walked ahead a step, as though to prove that she was strong and separate from him.

"Don't say that. Don't worry about pulling the switch or not pull-

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ing it. He didn't die because of you or me." He thought a moment, then added remorsefully, "Not because of you, anyway."

"We all killed him. Lawyers, guards, there must have been hundreds of people involved." She turned back to him and they linked arms again. "I feel so shaky still."

"Maybe it was the children," he said. "Everybody wants to protect them. There's nothing that will make somebody angry like the death of a child. Even Trouple likes kids." He thought of the shiny faces on the prison bus that rolled up near his office every three months.

"I can't believe I put you through this."

Billy scanned the tree line past his office building. "It's not over, either. Never will be. Just don't worry about it. Not you." He had walked her to a point from which they could see the tall oak he studied endlessly from his office window. They stopped walking and watched a crew of prisoners unpacking chain saws, axes, and cans of gasoline from a farm truck parked under its branches. From a hundred yards off they could see that the spring head of leaves was thin and yellow. Several large branches were barren.

"Why, that's the tree you enjoy so much. They're going to cut it down. Isn't there something you can do?"

"I ordered it cut," he said, catching her brown eyes with his own. "It was getting to be dangerous."

Her hand tightened on his arm. "You made a hard decision."

"Yeah, but my wife says I'm not smart enough to figure out what's right and what's wrong."

"We'll never stop wondering," she cried.

"Take it easy on yourself." He patted her hand like the good guy in a cowboy movie.

"How can we ever know? I'm just a math teacher and you're a, a—"

"Typewriter repairman," he said, smiling sadly into her face as between them passed the feeling that even though they might not forgive themselves, they would forgive each other. From a distance they looked like brother and sister stopped to talk, the dawn sun gilding her dark hair, lighting his bald head in a bronze glow.

From across the prison lawn came the dark and raspy sound of a big saw warming up.

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a *NEW* Amanda Russo story by

LEA CASH-DOMINGO

Amanda could see why the police might not buy Flaco's story. He had that television-thug look and the leather trousers didn't help the impression any. But maybe bad casting was responsible for people thinking lower-class Chicanos look like suspects.

Our third story by Lea Cash-Domingo, the second about die-hard California private investigator Amanda Russo . . .

DIAMOND VERSUS JIMINEZ

by LEA CASH-DOMINGO

The door opened tentatively. The man who entered seemed to be about thirty, and hispanic. He looked around my small office as if thinking whether he wanted to be here, focused momentarily on my framed degrees on the wall, and then fixed on me.

"You Amanda Russo?" he asked. The sweet scent of his cologne pervaded the room.

I said I was and asked him to take a seat.

He wasn't my ordinary, middle-class client with the tie and polyester suit. Fate had given him the sort of face seen on post-office Wanted posters, and he had picked out the kind of leather clothes you see on high-school dropouts hanging around corners in the barrio.

I waited as he slowly removed his leather jacket, hung it over the back of the chair, and sat down. First rule in meeting a prospective client: never rush the interview. Let the client take his time; let him tell you why he's there.

"My name's Flaco." He pronounced it Flahco. "I was told you got a good reputation."

"Who told you about me?"

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"My probation officer."

"Where were you doing time?" I asked. Rule number two: no moral judgments.

"Quentin."

He was older than he looked. He had to be at least twenty-five to have been sent up to San Quentin. Younger men were sent to Chino State Penitentiary. "For what?"

"Well, that's what brings me here. I got a bum rap and now that I'm out, I want my name cleared. It's not only my old lady who's on my case, trying to get me back to the Church, back to school, and hitched up with this girl. And it's not only the girl—who, to tell the truth, I'd like to marry—who says I'm never going to make something out of myself. The fact is, I'm thirty-one and I can't get a job. No one wants to touch me with a ten-foot pole, except minimum-wagers, and I can't start a family on four dollars an hour." He lowered his voice. "I figure if I can come up with some proof that I didn't do it, I'll be able to get my name cleared and land a good job."

I was impressed, not because he was trying so hard to appear sincere, but because I admire anyone who wants to better himself. "What were you convicted of?"

"I was sent up for a robbery I didn't do. Sure, I was at the mall when the job they said I did was being pulled. But because they had a description of a guy who looked like me and because I was in and out of Juvenile Hall when I was a kid, the cops picked me up."

"How about if you start at the beginning? Which robbery are we talking about?"

"A jewelry-store job in San Leandro four years ago. Diamond Jewelers."

I shook my head. If I'd read about it, I'd since forgotten. "Tell me about it."

"Some punks hit Bayfair Mall in the morning around ten and cleaned out the place. The cops picked me up, took me to a police station, and then this old woman, supposedly the owner of the shop, fingered me. But I didn't do it. I was minding my own business, just window-shopping."

"You like to window-shop, Mr. Flaco?"

"There's no mister before my name. Just Flaco. It's a nickname." He smiled ruefully. "A lot of Chicanos are nicknamed Flaco," he explained. "Yes, sure, I used to like it a lot. I used to think what I'd buy my old lady if I had the dough. Some people like to snort a few lines, some people like to cruise around—me, I like to walk around

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malls. I told that to the police when they picked me up, but no one was interested in what I had to say. They didn't even care that two guys pulled the job and I was all by myself. They said my accomplice got away with the jewels. In fact, the jewelry store was all the way down the other end of the mall."

"And where were you?"

"Round the side next to Macy's. There's a pet shop and a computer store there. I watched the kittens in the window a while, then I watched a guy running a program."

I could see why the police might not buy his story. He had that television-thug look and the leather trousers didn't help the impression any. But maybe bad casting is responsible for people thinking lower-class Chicanos look like suspects.

"Can you prove you were where you say you were, Flaco?"

"Well, there wasn't anybody I know hanging out, too, if that's what you mean."

"Did the manager at either the pet shop or the computer store talk to you?"

He shook his head.

"What about deliveries?"

His dark-brown eyes pierced me as he thought. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "There was an ice truck round the side of Macy's."

"Anything else?"

He shook his head. "That's about it."

There were a few difficulties. I explained first off that if Flaco were a bank executive looking for an embezzler, I might spend a month tracking down witnesses and finding new ones. Unless witnesses had seen a violent crime and weren't afraid to testify, they'd either moved or forgotten the event. After four years, trying to shake memories was next to impossible.

The second difficulty was more serious. Generally speaking, the weight of evidence necessary to reverse a conviction is heavier than what's necessary to initially defend against prosecution. The burden of proof for a reversal is usually on the convicted man. "It could take a lot of time and money to get a reversal," I concluded.

"Well," he said, "as long as I'm not working I got all the time in the world."

"And money?" I had to ask. I'm no sponger, but I usually don't take pro bono cases.

"How much are we talking about?"

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"Could be several thousand dollars, unless I can interest the ACLU or Legal Aid with an open-and-shut case."

"Well, I ain't rich, but I ain't poor, either. I got about six grand saved up from when I did auto-body painting before I got sent up."

We were on, then. "I'll give you a week at my regular rate," I told him, "but if I come up empty-handed I'm going to quit. It simply won't be worth your money."

He reached inside a pocket and pulled out a money clip thick with bills, which he unclipped and began counting out on the desk. "Five hundred bucks. Will that get you started?"

I called criminal investigations at the Hayward Police Department and talked to Officer Robertson who put me on hold while he retrieved the file. Open-and-shut case. Juan Jiminez, a.k.a. Flaco, had been identified in an instant lineup by the shopkeeper. Robertson transferred me to the officer who had investigated the case.

Miguel Manuel had himself grown up in Hayward, several blocks from where Jiminez did. He said he knew all about the lines Chicanos could give. He hadn't been taken in by Flaco's and didn't think I should be, either.

Did Flaco tell him about the morning window-shopping? I asked. He certainly did, Officer Manuel said with a laugh. Flaco's story was as thin as his nickname. The thin man.

After hanging up, I called my answering service and told them I was going out. Then I closed the one-room office and drove to San Leandro.

The Bayfair Mall was like any other commercial eyesore on the map: a big pink-cement block with newly paved parking lots.

Inside was another story. Artificial light and plants gave the tiled walkways and tinted-glass display cases an aura of natural beauty. Clothes, food, and plastic plants—the Plastic Age guide to modern living. Window-shopping wouldn't be my idea of a morning's relaxation, but I could imagine that for a young man who had lived in the suburban wasteland where there was nothing better to do a stroll through plasticland could set the imagination in motion. All you needed to belong was the desire to buy.

I let myself out through Macy's entrance and walked around to the west side of the plaza. It was eleven in the morning. Already, there was a low-grade rush of traffic through the parking lot. The side where Flaco said he'd seen the ice truck housed an optometry

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store, an upholstery and fabric shop, and an electronic-gadget and computer store. I went into each and asked the store managers how long they'd been there. They had all been at that location for over five years.

On the level beneath the optometry store were a number of food stands. Frozen yogurt, fresh-fruit slurpies, donuts and bearclaws, Chinese and Mexican fast-foods. All used ice, which they made in their shops. Deliveries of ice? No, some managers said with a chuckle, as though buying ice was a waste of profit. What deliveries they received were from a dock located at the far end of the mall.

I walked down to the east entrance. There I found Diamond Jewelers. Next to it was a pet shop. It didn't look good for Flaco.

Chimes sounded as I walked inside the jewelers'. A dark-haired woman dressed in a lacy blouse and tweed pants stepped out from behind a counter and asked if she could help me. I took out my wallet and showed her my California P.I. license. "Are you the owner?" I asked.

She nodded. "Cecily Carton."

"You had a robbery here four years ago."

"That's right." She slipped her hand into her pocket and drew out a pair of eyeglasses. Putting them on, she stepped closer as if to have a better look at me.

"Did you collect insurance?"

She reacted as though stung, then removed the glasses, folded them, and slipped them back into her pocket. "I really don't see what business it is of yours."

"Your store was robbed by two men, but you only identified one."

"I only really saw one well enough to identify."

"Where did you see him?"

"Through the window."

"At the time of the robbery?"

"Of course. What do you take me for?"

I wasn't sure. What was running through my mind was an insurance scheme: she could have hired the men who broke into her store and then fingered an innocent man.

"Who is your insurance carrier?" I asked.

She all but threw me out.

I went next door to the pet shop. The clerk was friendly. Yes, the pet shop was located next door to an upholstery store near Macy's four years ago. Why did they move? I asked her. Well, she wasn't

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a hundred percent sure, but the mall eliminated several shops at that end to add another entrance. If I liked, she could ask the owner to contact me. As I gave her my card, it occurred to me that Flaco's ice truck might be the initials of a trucking company.

The mall security had a list of vendors and some of the regular distribution companies that supplied the stores. No ice company.

For the cost of the court transcript and my name and reason for wanting it, I had a copy of the trial proceedings. *Diamond versus Jiminez.* Over a lunch of minestrone soup and a buttered roll, I leafed through the pages, hoping an inspiration would hit me between the eyes. What hit me between the eyes was the realization that the only thing aside from the location of the pet shop that I had to go on was Flaco's word. Or what Officer Manuel had called his line.

At ten o'clock, according to the plaintiff, two young men dressed like Flaco, with dark-brown hair and sideburns, threw bricks at the display windows just as the shopkeeper finished lining up the jewelry in an aesthetically pleasing arrangement, scooped up everything they could get their hands on, and ran. Forty minutes later, Flaco was in custody. The jewels were never recovered. One of the witnesses was the store owner's wife. She positively identified Flaco as one of the perpetrators.

That's fear in the suburbs. All hispanics look the same. I had a special interest in Flaco and wanted him to be innocent, even though I wasn't convinced about his story. But the question rattled around in my brain: what if I had the bad timing to wind up in the wrong place at the wrong time, with no alibi but that I was killing time?

There were two witnesses to the robbery in addition to the shopkeeper. At first I figured it probably wasn't worth the time talking to them, even if I could find them—my experience was that after four years people didn't remember much. But then there was rule number three: take nothing for granted.

I went back to the office, took out an Oakland phonebook, and looked up the first witness, an Alejandro Jarvis, and found him. I dialed the number and an Asian-sounding man came on the line. Yes, he was Alejandro Jarvis and he did witness a robbery four years ago, but he couldn't remember the boys. They were boys? I asked. Yes, yes, he said, *ellos son muchachos.*

The second witness, Susan Bellows, had lived in San Leandro four years ago. After consulting eight Bay Area directories, I almost gave

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up. She could be living anywhere—if she was alive. For all I knew, she had married and changed her name. But I'm a die-hard investigator. Before the day was over, I'd check the City Hall records for a marriage or death certificate for Susan Bellows.

My next order of business was checking the white pages for companies abbreviated as I.C.E. There was the Independent Computer Echo, which turned out to be a musical outlet. The Industrial Center for Excellence—a distribution center for cleaning products. And the Integral Central Engineering Company specialized in city planning and consulting.

After researching everything that could be researched on a phone, I went down to City Hall in San Leandro—where I found no marriage or death certificate for Susan Bellows.

I drove down the street to the office of the San Leandro newspaper and took out an ad in the personals column for Susan Bellows. Maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe someone who knew her or Susan herself would give me a call.

Three days later all I had was a definite yes from the pet-shop owner that four years ago the shop had been located next to the computer store at the west entrance to the mall. But I had no takers on my ad.

A visit to the county assessor's office told me who owned Diamond Jewelers but not who they were insured by, and the mall's management office wasn't willing to disclose that information without a court order. I shook a few trees of friends who sit on the bench in San Leandro courts who could give me a court order, and got one.

Diamond Jewelers was insured by International Jewelers, a Puerto Rican-based outfit. The insurance agent in Puerto Rico who handled the Carton case told me the company hadn't paid on that theft because the Cartons' payment on their policy was in arrears and they weren't insured at the time of the robbery. I now understood the pained expression on Mrs. Carton's face, and pitied her. And stopped suspecting her of hiring the men who broke into her store.

Not all cases get solved. Some aren't solvable. This one didn't seem to be. I called the number Flaco had given me. His mother answered. *No hablo ingles.*

Donde puedo escribirle? I asked. She gave me their address.

I returned Flaco's money less the cost of the transcript and referred him to a career counselor I knew at the Department for Human Resources . . .

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By Berkeley's standards it was a hot day, with the temperature at seventy-six degrees by midmorning. I was on my way to the University of California to a conference at which I was to be a featured speaker. The topic was on how to present expert testimony. I had memorized the forty-minute address and was trying, as I sat in traffic, to decide what questions an audience of second-year law students would have.

There was a line of cars ahead of me. The corner light changed to green for the third time. Nothing happened. I couldn't squeeze into the other lane. I watched the clock on my dashboard. Fifteen minutes to go.

I waited impatiently, tapping my fingernails on the armrest. Minutes ticked by. I had the sneaking suspicion that I was going to be late to my own presentation. Would the class wait? How entertaining could I be after sitting in a hot car, my blood-pressure rising?

The car ahead suddenly managed to veer into the other lane. I followed. To hell with trying to get into the cheapest lot this side of campus. As I turned the corner, I saw the problem. A big truck was wedged between the ramp to the tiered parking lot and a parked car.

The big brown letters on the side of the truck jolted my attention. I.E.C. Below them was the company's name: Independent Electronics Company. I wondered whether this might be Flaco's ice truck.

I returned to the office two hours later and ten degrees hotter. Grabbing a cup of coffee, I set my briefcase and jacket on top of the filing cabinet and unearthed the court transcript for the date the Hayward police had picked up Flaco. Then I dialed 411 for I.E.C.'s phone number.

The Independent Electronics Company general office referred me to their warehouse in Fremont. I called and was put on hold by an impatient clerk.

When she came back on the line, I asked the sixty-four-million-dollar question. She put me on hold again. At ten cents a minute, it was the most expensive Musak I'd heard in a long time.

When she returned in twenty minutes she was chewing gum. Now, what was it I'd wanted? she asked. I told her.

"Lady, you got any idea what you're asking for? I got three phones all ringing off the hook, a boss who's sitting in the back room shouting orders at me, and you want me to drop everything I'm doing and look that up for you?"

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The phone went dead in my ear. Thanks for nothing. I put on the answering service and drove to Fremont.

The clerk turned out to be a pencil of a woman, maybe twenty-three, with a mouth on her that could be heard all the way to the street.

"Yeah, gotcha, pick up for who'd you say you are?" She popped gum as she wrote down the order on a bill of lading. "Yeah, yeah, you'll get yours in the same time as everyone else." She hung up and looked over at me. "Who the hell are you?"

I told her. Over her shoulder I could see a large man with a beefy red face sitting in a glass-walled room, smoking a cigarette and staring through me as though I was another glass wall. I waved a twenty-dollar bill at her.

She took it and told me to look the information up myself in the red three-ring binder she put on top of the counter. Somehow I didn't feel I was getting my money's worth. But the information was there: a delivery had been made on the day in question to Electronics Plus at Bayfair Mall at ten past ten in the morning. I now had enough to talk to my lawyer friend at the ACLU.

Party Blow-Ups was a balloon company in San Lorenzo. The warehouse occupied half a block. Five or six Chicano men gathered in the parking lot, eating sandwiches and admiring a new motorcycle in mixed English and Spanish.

"Yeah, *tengo un nuevo blanco coche para mi esposa.*"

"Blanco coche," one mimicked, laughing. "It ain't a white car, man—it's a white body with a green hood. Convertible."

"No es verdad. It's white."

Flaco waved. "Hey, Mujerita," he said as I crossed the lot. "It's been a while. What brings you out this way?" He'd changed his hairstyle. It was long now, above the shoulders.

"Hi there, Flaco."

He led me away from his co-workers, past the warehouse and onto the sidewalk. "Look, I'm helping a friend out until I can get a real job. The guys here know me as Juan. They don't know me from before. Not even my friend. He's actually a friend of a friend," he added apologetically. "I kinda don't want them to know. What brings you around?"

"I found your ice truck."

His eyes lit up. "No kidding. Where?"

I told him.

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"That's terrific. Is it open-and-shut, like you were saying you needed it to be?"

"No, but it's a start. It confirms your alibi for the time the robbery was committed. An attorney with the ACLU wants to speak with you."

His eyes watered. "You really came through for me," he said in a tone that revealed not many people did.

"I was happy to."

We shook hands.

"Take care of yourself, Juan."

"I'll send you a check. How much do you want?"

I didn't want a thing, but I knew that if I didn't mention a fair rate, he'd feel insulted. "A hundred and fifty," I replied.

He held up a thumb, gave me a nod, and walked away humming.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

SKETCHY CONFESSION

by SHARON E. MARTIN

I traced her artless sprawl with painter's chalk,
My masterpiece upon the stone-tiled floor,
Then watched the lawman hurry up the walk
To knock upon my door.

I acted the bereaved—now tears, now a sigh—
And told him all I saw,
Withholding only why she had to die:
She wanted proof that I could draw.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JULIAN SYMONS

At school Gerald's reactions were too slow for him to get into the cricket or football teams, but he was anchor man in the tug-o'-war competition and won the heavyweight boxing, although the following year he refused to go in for it. "What do I want to hit him for, he's done nothing to me," he said to the sports master, who was tickled enough to tell Mr. Burke. Gerald's father was not tickled at all and set out to give his son some friendly advice about the need for competition in life.

A stunning story, on a par with his unforgettable "The Crimson Coach Murders" and "The Boiler," by Julian Symons, called by H. R. F. Keating "one of those blessed crime writers (Stanley Ellin is another) who do not give us the same book time and again but range the whole field in a succession of surprises . . ."

I, TOO, LIVED IN ARCADIA

by JULIAN SYMONS

Gerald was brought up in Arcadia, and without doubt that was a problem. But he had more difficulties than that.

Arcadia was the name given by the builder to an estate of what were called in the brochure individually designed houses for top-class executives, combining the peace and grace of country living with all the nearby facilities of a market town, plus an hourly train service to London. The development, of no more than thirty houses, was snapped up before they were built, but their popularity prompted a second eager entrepreneur to acquire several adjacent acres on which was built in due course Greater Arcadia. The original Arcadians thus found themselves part of a much bigger complex,

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and one less socially desirable than they had envisaged. The original Arcadia had been a couple of miles out of town, but its much larger offshoot, plus the shops and petrol stations set up to serve them, meant that the town merged almost indistinguishably into Arcadian country. But there were still green fields and country walks around, and it was said that nobody had ever sold a house in the Arcadias at anything but a handsome profit.

Arcadia, then, was still more or less Arcadian. Until the Soft Shoe Rapist came.

Mr. Burke worked in London in a ministry, something to do with what was called social development, and he had risen in the gradual, almost inevitable Civil Service way to become quite important. Very important? No, not that, a secondary figure who, as he sometimes said, was subject to the demands of his lord and master, the Minister. He had left a comfortable London suburb and come to Arcadia at the urging of his wife Pearl, who had aspirations to a more gracious way of life.

And Pearl did find Arcadian life more gracious, although it worried her that so many of the other Arcadians (not Greater Arcadians, an inferior breed) had swimming pools and jacuzzis that the Burkes could not afford. She was trying to persuade her husband that a jacuzzi, at least, was an essential adjunct to Arcadian living when she ran her car into a tree and died instantly. Gerald, three years old at the time, was in the car with her, and insisted when the police arrived that his mother was asleep.

Up to that time, Mr. Burke had hardly been aware of Gerald's existence. He saw the child only for a couple of minutes in the morning before taking the London train, and by the time he returned in the evening Gerald was being put to bed. Pearl's death, however, made him uncomfortably aware that he was responsible for this rather large three-year-old child. A few months of life with a housekeeper worried about what she called Gerald's persistent naughtiness, which she tried to cure by smacking him frequently on the head, arms, and legs with a ruler, convinced him that this wouldn't do. He married Emerald, exchanging, as he said in one of his few but often-repeated jokes, one jewel for another.

Emerald was a secretary in the Ministry and already had a son of Gerald's age named Gavin, the outcome of an affair that had ended even before Gavin was born. She was looking for security rather than romance or social status, and rightly thought that in

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Mr. Burke she had found it. When she first visited Arcadia, she held out her arms to Gerald, who backed away. Later on the same day, the boys quarreled when playing a game together and Gerald, who was much the larger, got astride Gavin and began to bang his head on the floor. Emerald said Gerald seemed rather uncontrolled, and Mr. Burke said she would soon lick him into shape. Then he spoke to his son. "Gerald, this is your new mother. Come and kiss her." At that Gerald ran out of the room.

Emerald did not lick Gerald into shape, had no desire to lick anybody into shape. She was a simple, easygoing woman whose voice retained traces of her East End origins, who thought she had made a lucky marriage, enjoyed life in Arcadia, and hardly noticed the whispers among those Mr. Burke regarded as his friends that he had certainly taken a step or two down in the social scale with his second marriage.

Emerald knew the importance of keeping her man happy, and the not unrelated problem of keeping her figure. She looked after Gavin, the second star round which her life revolved, and would have looked after Gerald and helped him with homework as she did Gavin, but Gerald wouldn't let her. Once she had, unfortunately, suggested a wrong answer to a question about history, and when he came home the next afternoon he tore up his exercise book and threw it at her. After that she gave up. "When he wants help he'll ask for it," she said to her husband, and Mr. Burke nodded agreement.

As the years went by, it became obvious, or should have been obvious, that Gerald needed help from somebody. The difference between his abilities and those of Gavin became more marked every year. They both went to the primary school in town and then to the state-aided grammar, and Gavin at once showed his aptitude and eagerness for learning while Gerald was never better than sluggish—regarded by some teachers as backward, by others as deliberately lazy. Gavin won prizes for best essay, most original drawing, biggest contribution to class harmony. Gerald won no prizes at all, and was consistently near the bottom of every class.

The differences extended to their appearance. Gavin was small, neat, and tidy, Gerald an outsize boy, six foot tall at thirteen and bulky with it. His clothes always seemed too small for him, buttons somehow became torn off his jackets, his shoes were sometimes unlaced, his lank hair was all over the place. The only area in which Gerald might have excelled was sport. His reactions were too slow

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for him to get into the cricket or football teams, but he was anchor man in the tug-o'-war competition and won the heavyweight boxing, although in the following year he refused to go in for it. "What do I want to hit him for, he's done nothing to me," he said to the sports master, who was tickled enough to tell Mr. Burke.

Gerald's father was not tickled at all. He set out to give his son some friendly advice about the need for competition in life, but found him so unresponsive that, most unusually for him, he began to shout. "You're ready to let everybody walk all over you, is that it? Is that what you mean to do in life?"

Gerald shuffled his size-twelve shoes. "Don't know."

"Don't know! You *ought* to know! You've got to stand up for yourself, not let people walk all over you—otherwise you'll end up as a crossing sweeper!" Afterward he spoke to Emerald. "I don't want to be hard on the boy. Has he got any school friends?"

She shook her head.

"No friends, doesn't work at school, sits up in his room reading comics or wearing those earphones and listening to pop music. It's not natural, he's got no interest in anything. I tell you, Gavin's more like my son than my own flesh and blood is."

Emerald laughed. "You're so impatient, it's not like you. You just see—I think he's a late developer, he'll do something that surprises you one day."

There was no sign of Gerald doing anything surprising at the end of his schooldays. Gavin got a scholarship to Oxford. Gerald did get a job, indeed several jobs, but kept none of them for long. He was an assistant in a record shop, served behind the counter in the local fast-food restaurant, worked on a lathe in a shoe factory, did odd jobs in a timber yard, and was a rider for a messenger service. He puttered in and out of town on a scooter wearing a mauve woollen hat to which he became much attached. He had no girl friends, and went on reading the comics that most of the boys he knew at school had given up at the age of fourteen. Emerald was indulgent as ever, but Gerald's jobs and his appearance fulfilled all Mr. Burke's worst fears. He could hardly bear to look at the boy.

The thing that infuriated him more than anything else was that Gerald seemed quite unaware of the ludicrous figure he cut among the neat lawns, gleaming Volvos, Vauxhalls, and sports Escorts, and the designer jeans of his young contemporaries in Arcadia. When Gavin came home and brought friends with him, the appearance of

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Gerald, shambling and awkward, dressed in baggy and not very clean trousers, sitting on a sofa reading comics in which heroes endowed with miraculous powers got the better of villains armed with germ bombs and remote-control devices that could trigger off the destruction of cities, was almost more than Mr. Burke could bear. Something, he said, must be done. Supposing he was set up in the town with a small flat of his own, how would that do? Perhaps Gavin could speak to him?

So Gavin spoke but, as he had warned his mother and stepfather in advance, without effect. "He really didn't seem to understand what I was talking about," he reported. "He says this is his home, he doesn't want to leave it. I think he'd be lost in a place of his own, he wouldn't look after himself. He says if you don't want him to read comics downstairs he'll keep them in his room."

"What about your friends, what do they say?"

"Don't get me wrong when I say they think he's a joke. But they don't mind him, nor do I." Gavin hesitated. "I think you should accept him as a sort of force of nature."

Emerald's eyes filled with tears, and she said they mustn't send Gerald away, it would be too cruel.

So Gerald stayed. He was now six foot five and very broad, with enormous hands. Shoes had to be specially made to fit him.

Then came the Soft Shoe Rapist.

He appeared in Greater Arcadia, visiting three houses within a month. He was evidently adept at climbing drainpipes and getting onto roofs, his means of access being through windows left marginally or wide open on the upper floors of houses. He wore a mask, was clothed in black, and threatened his victims either with a revolver or a large curved knife. All the attacks were made late at night. His first two victims were young women with small children whose husbands were away, something that suggested knowledge of the people in the houses, or careful study of their habits. The third victim was in Arcadia itself, a middle-aged woman who slept in another room from her husband. He woke, however, entered his wife's bedroom, and was stabbed twice in the ensuing fight. He was rushed to hospital, and for a week was on the critical list, but recovered.

Because the rapist operated in the dark, descriptions were necessarily vague, but the victims agreed that he was big, with powerful hands. He spoke in a soft hissing voice, and moved soundlessly. A footprint of a lightweight hi-tec shoe was found at the bottom of one

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drainpipe he had climbed and the press christened him the Soft Shoe Rapist.

A Guardian Committee was set up to organize the protection of Arcadia. Its chairman was a local car dealer named Frampton, and one of the members was the owner of the timber yard where Gerald had worked, whose name was Tilsley Williams. It was Williams who came round to the Burkes' house and suggested that Gerald should join the Committee. Gerald was out, so Williams saw Mr. Burke, who stared at him when he made the request.

"There's nobody from this part of the estate has joined the Committee," Williams said. Mr. Burke did not care for Arcadia to be lumped in with the much inferior houses of Greater Arcadia as "the estate," but he did not comment. "And he's a good strong lad, Gerald. And willing—or was when he worked for us, we were sorry to lose him." At this Mr. Burke winced. The very idea of his son working in a timber yard, and of this bristly-moustached little tradesman talking about him familiarly, was odious. "Course we'd like it if you'd join us yourself, but I don't suppose you can spare the time." The sarcasm in Williams' voice was kept just within the limits of politeness. "Trouble is, we're all chiefs and no Indians, if you take my meaning. Jerry'd be useful helping around, delivering rotas and such. That's if he felt inclined."

Mr. Burke said distantly that he would speak to his son when he came in and let Mr. Williams know the result. He talked to Emerald, who was all in favor of the idea, and then to Gerald, who listened to him carefully, then said, "He's a bad man, isn't he?"

"What, the—?" Mr. Burke couldn't bring himself to use the ghastly media term. "Yes, very bad."

"He ought to be stopped."

"Of course, but—" He checked himself again. "Some people would think catching this sort of man is best left to the police."

"They haven't caught him. The good men have to join together to catch the bad ones."

"I don't think they expect you to catch him. From what I can make out, they want you as a kind of messenger boy."

"I don't mind about that." Gerald smiled. He had a sweetly innocent smile, or so Emerald said. Mr. Burke simply felt he would like to knock some sense into the boy's head.

So Gerald became a member of the Guardian Committee, which operated enthusiastically for the next few weeks. Frampton had

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lapel badges printed for Committee members saying GUARDIAN, and Gerald wore this all the time on his jacket or pullover. A roster was organized by which Guardians in couples took turns keeping watch in Arcadia and Greater Arcadia throughout the night. All of them were men, something commented on unfavorably, but as Mr. Peabody, the assistant bank manager, pointed out, men were better able to cope with somebody ready to use a knife than a woman. Gerald took his turn at watching, carried messages on his scooter, and seemed not to notice the jokes, some good-natured and others less so, based on the fact that he was the only resident of the original Arcadia to join the Committee.

"Think they're too good for us, I daresay," Mr. Frampton said. "Don't want to join the hoi polloi." He smiled as he said it, indicating how absurd it was to think a man like himself who drove a Roller (even though it was the firm's, not his own) could ever be classed among the hoi polloi.

The police viewed the Guardians' activities with tolerant amusement. Some hundreds of men convicted of various sexual misdemeanors had been turned up by their computer, and they were slowly eliminating them, but if the residents wanted to form this kind of vigilante committee—well, it could do no harm, and kept them occupied. But after several weeks, as there were no more attacks, and the nights grew colder, and there was a whole week when it rained every night, the Guardians' ardor faded. There had been some rather similar attacks twenty miles away, and it was agreed that the Guardians could be disbanded.

"We scared him off," Mr. Frampton said. "He knew if he tried it again he'd get more than he bargained for."

So, with mutual thanks and self-congratulation, the Guardians ceased to exist. But Gerald continued to walk round the executive houses of Arcadia with their wide pavements and large lawns, then round Greater Arcadia where the pavements were narrower, the lawns smaller, and the houses much less individual, all of them having been built to one of four designs. He wore his woollen cap and the Guardian badge and carried his father's cane, which had a large brass loaded top in the shape of the dog-faced Egyptian god Anubis. Mr. Burke had been amused by his son's insistence on acting as solitary watchman, and gave him the stick.

"It belonged to my father, and his father, too. Give anybody a tap with the business end of it and he'll know all about it." He smacked the dog's head onto a cushion and made a dent. Gerald nodded . . .

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It was on a dark night in early November that Gerald caught the Soft Shoe Rapist.

His evening walk took a little less than an hour. He was halfway through Greater Arcadia when he heard the sounds of a window being thrown open and a woman's cry. The lighting throughout the Arcadias was discreet and it was a few moments before Gerald made out the house from which the cry had come, and then sensed rather than saw a figure moving down the drainpipe. He opened the house gate, ran across the lawn, and reached the figure just after it touched the ground.

With a sweeping blow the figure knocked dog-faced Anubis out of his hand, but Gerald managed to catch hold of a leg and the two bodies writhed together on the grass. A light showed in one of the houses and glinted on steel. Gerald groped for the knife. It disappeared, then he felt something push at his side and saw the knife raised again, now dark with blood. He felt no pain, but the sight of blood made him angry and he put two great hands round the figure's neck and squeezed. There was another push at him, and another, then the figure was beneath him and his hands still round its neck, but the strength seemed to drain from them and they loosened. The figure lay beneath him, a gurgling sound coming from the throat. Then there were lights, lights everywhere, and voices. After that, nothing.

He woke in hospital several hours later and learned that he had been stabbed three times, once within a few inches of the heart. He had caught the Soft Shoe Rapist, who was escaping after another rape in which the victim had ignored his threat that if she did not remain silent he would come back and kill her. The rapist was a member of the Guardian Committee—Mr. Peabody, the assistant bank manager. He was not on the police computer.

Gerald recovered to find himself a national hero. The headlines ranged from ONE MAN GUARDS ARCADIA to UNARMED JERRY FACES KILLER RAPIST, with half a dozen variations in between. He gave several interviews from his hospital bed and proved to be a natural headline maker. JERRY SAYS IT'S GOODIES VERSUS BADDIES, one paper said. Another headed its story THE SIMPLE FAITH OF THE MAN IN THE WOOLLY HAT and a third I JUST DID WHAT I HAD TO, HERO SAYS. The punning possibilities of his name were not ignored. JERRY IS NO BERK, said Britain's best-selling tabloid at the top of a story which began,

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"Jerry Burke may look a bit of a berk in his woollen hat, but when it comes to defending law and order he's a tiger."

After he came out of hospital, Gerald was stopped in the street by people who shook his hand and said it was young men like him, ready to go in there and take a chance, who were making Britain great again. He declined invitations to speak to local schools, Rotary Clubs, and Chambers of Commerce, but appeared for three minutes on local TV, where in answer to a question about what he felt when tackling a man with a knife he said, "I didn't feel anything, I just did it. I knew he was a bad man and had to be stopped." The messenger firm that employed him found he was in such demand that they doubled his wages.

To say Mr. Burke was astonished by Gerald's sudden fame would be an understatement. Charles Cloudesley, a retired merchant banker who lived only three or four minutes' walk away, embarrassed him by saying he had a hero for a son, and even his lord and master noticed one of the press stories and said he was to be congratulated on having such a fine young man for his son. He felt like asking his lord and master if it was a matter for congratulation to have a son who was content to be an overgrown messenger boy and read nothing but comics. He was irritated by Emerald, who said Gavin and his friends had been very impressed and that she had always said he would be proud of Gerald if he gave the boy time.

The person who seemed least affected was Gerald himself. He went on reading comics and listening to pop records, and continued making his round of the two Arcadias at night, taking with him the loaded stick, which in reference to the dog-headed god who topped it he called the dog. "I'm taking the dog for a walk," he would say, looking at his father and stepmother to see if they laughed.

The dog was of service when, at the end of November, Gerald was patrolling—which was how he thought of it—Greater Arcadia and saw a girl trying to get out of a car and being stopped from doing so by a man inside. He was thirty yards away when he saw the car door open and the girl get out, then heard her scream as she was pulled back again.

When he reached the car, a struggle was taking place inside. He pulled open the door. The driver had his hands round the girl's throat. She was shrieking something and clawing at his face. When the door opened, they both looked round.

They seemed astonished when Gerald shouted, "Leave her alone!" The girl shrieked something at him, got out, and pushed past. The

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man also got out of the car and came round toward her. Gerald barred the way. The man let out a volleyful of obscenities and hit Gerald on the jaw. Gerald brought the dog into action and gave the man a tremendous crack on the shin. The man collapsed to the ground. The girl jumped onto Gerald's back and pulled his hair, knocking off his woollen hat. He staggered, trying to shake her off, and inadvertently struck the car's side window with the dog. The tinkle of glass brought people out of nearby houses.

The encounter remained unreported in the press, perhaps fortunately. The couple proved to be man and wife, the man threatened to sue Gerald for assault, Gerald pointed out that he had struck the first blow. The matter ended with Gerald paying for the broken car window. He did not mention the incident to his father or to Emerald, but it became known and he was transformed from a hero into something like a figure of fun. People at work asked if he had broken up any more happy families lately. Nevertheless, he continued to patrol Arcadia.

In December the weather became colder, the roads were icy, a little snow fell. Decorations appeared in windows, fairy lights on Christmas trees, circlets of holly round front doors. Gavin came home, bringing with him a girl student who seemed to view Gerald with the curiosity appropriate to a creature of another species. Both of them were bursting with high spirits, and their gaiety infected Mr. Burke, so that one night he joined with Emerald in a sentimental sing-song, with Gavin playing the piano. Gerald had no voice and when he joined in the girl almost collapsed with laughter.

At the office he was no longer in demand as a despatch rider, his fame seemed altogether forgotten. In late December it began to snow in earnest, thick flakes that settled on the ground and provided a carpet that silenced footsteps and made driving dangerous. A week before Christmas, Gerald went out on what proved his last patrol. His faithful dog went with him.

He was still in Arcadia, the original Arcadia of big houses and discreetly dim street lighting, when he saw the man. Under the mantle of snow, the individual outlines of houses were not easily distinguishable, but Gerald was almost sure that it was the Cloudesley house from which the man emerged. The place itself was in darkness, and the man who came not out of the front door but round the side of the house was carrying a large bag over his shoul-

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der. He made his way quickly yet stealthily to the gate and hurried down the road.

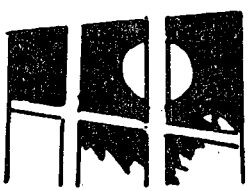
Gerald quickened his own pace to catch up with the man, although this was not easy. There was nobody about, for they were in the midst of a really heavy snowfall. Snow blew into Gerald's face, blurring his vision; snow was wet on his mouth and his wellingtons were more suited for trudging than hurrying. But still he gained ground, was near enough to call out.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop!" The man turned for a moment, long enough for Gerald to see that he appeared to have no proper face, then he pulled a hood over his head and went on, more quickly than before. Gerald started to run.

He felt an exultant certainty that he had found a thief, a baddie, for if he was a goodie why did he not stop when hailed? Perhaps with the baddie caught, that moment of fame would return.

He caught the man at the point where Arcadia ended and Greater Arcadia began, put a hand on his shoulder, swung him round. To his horror, the stranger revealed not a face, but a hideous mask. He put down the bag he carried, fumbled inside it. Before his hand could come out holding a knife or revolver, dog-headed Anubis struck.

Raised high and then swung down like a mallet, the stick hit the stranger once, twice, three times. The man fell to his knees. The hood had fallen aside and the wig beneath it was askew, revealing a bald pate. He had been not only a thief, but one in disguise! Anger filled Gerald, anger and a wonderful awareness of his own rightness as he rained blows on that wickedly dishonest bald head until dog-headed Anubis was wet and dripping and the man lay still on the snow, his coat rucked up to show the red clothes beneath, his bag fallen open and a couple of the toys in it spilled out. The Santa Claus mask had slipped off, too, revealing the face of old Mr. Cloudesley.



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ON OUR COVER

Few public personalities can claim the notoriety and adulation bestowed upon World Wrestling Federation Champion Hulk Hogan, who is one of the most widely recognized figures in the world. The 6′8″, 303-pound wrestler first won the WWF title on January 23, 1984, in New York's Madison Square Garden, and it wasn't long before he captured the imagination of the entire world. The most dominant wrestler of the Eighties, Hogan is the only WWF star to appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated.* One of his greatest feats has been bodyslamming and pinning 7′4″, 500-pound Andre the Giant before a world-record crowd of 93,173 fans at *Wrestlemania III,* March 29, 1987, at Michigan's Pontiac Silverdome.

Hulk dropped the WWF championship on February 5, 1988, as he was "cheated but not defeated" before a national television audience of over 33 million viewers. He regained the title on April 2, 1989, at *Wrestlemania V* by defeating former friend and tag-team partner "Macho Man" Randy Savage. The event took place at Atlantic City's Trump Plaza and was seen by 50 million people in forty countries around the world.

Probably the most popular wrestler ever, Hogan is admired by adults and idolized by children, and he returns their affection by encouraging his "Little Hulksters" to "train, say your prayers, and eat your vitamins."

Upcoming for Hogan, who makes his home in Venice Beach, California, is his first starring role in a full-length feature film, *No Holds Barred,* scheduled for release this summer.

"Q"

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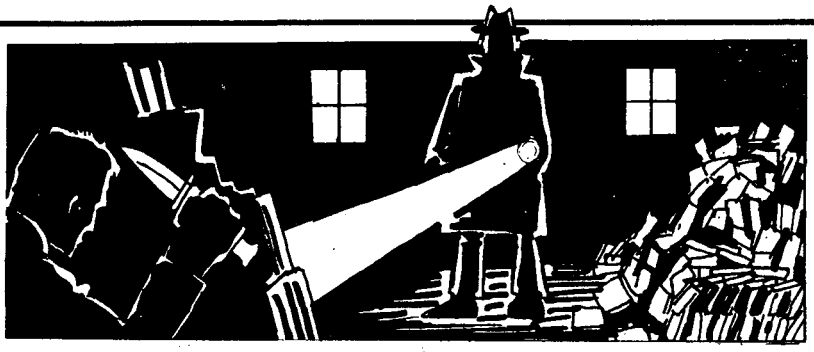

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